The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training Foreign Affairs Oral History Project

AMBASSADOR INTS M. SILINS

Interviewed by: Charles Stuart Kennedy

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Q: Today is the 25th of February 1998. This is an interview with Ints M. Silins. This is being done on behalf of the Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training and I'm Charles Stuart Kennedy.

Well, to begin with, can you tell me about when and where you were born and something about your family?

SILINS: Yes. I was born in Riga, Latvia on March 25, 1942. Not perhaps the most auspicious time and place to enter the world.

Q: I think I know what you mean.

SILINS: Yes, at the time of my birth Latvia was being battered from both sides by the two arch-villains of the 20th century, Hitler and Stalin. By the end of World War II, Latvia was to lose not only its independence but roughly a third of its population to execution, deportation or emigration. It was hard to see that this story would have a happy ending. In fact, the day of my birth, March 25, was to become a national day of mourning, to mark the deportation of over 40,000 people to Siberia in 1949. Latvia's story isn't too well known, so perhaps you'll forgive me if I sketch some of the background.

Latvia first won independence in1920. Just two decades later, it was occupied and annexed by Soviet Russia after a deal between Hitler and Stalin, the infamous Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. That occupation was accompanied and followed by executions and deportations and a harsh internal regime that made most Latvians very anxious to avoid a repetition if they could. Germany invaded the following year as Hitler's forces pressed their assault on Soviet Russia. The Germans weren't a great improvement on the Russians. They compelled able-bodied Latvian men, my father among them, to serve on the eastern front. Nevertheless many Latvians, while they had no love for fascism, saw Germany as the only possible counterforce to Stalin and hoped to develop an independent military force that, with eventual help from the Allies, might keep Russia at bay.

The Germans were in control of Latvia at the time of my birth in 1942. But in 1944 Germany's defeat was looming, as was the likelihood that the Russians would be coming back to re-impose their brutal regime. So when I was just two, my mother and I joined thousands of other Latvians who fled the country as best they could, mostly to Sweden or Germany. We made our way to Germany and ended up spending five years there in various displaced person camps - DP camps, as they were called, eventually in the American zone. My father remained in Latvia with other soldiers holding out in the hope that the Allies would come to their aid. That help did not come. They were taken prisoner by Russian troops and sent to Siberia. A few years later, he died in a Soviet death camp.

I have almost no reliable memories from my first two years in Latvia and only sketchy ones from the DP camps in Germany.

Q: What about the background of your family?

SILINS: To tell you the truth, I don't know a great deal about the background of my family. I know that my father was a trained agronomist, but I have no personal recollection of him since I probably only saw him fleetingly as an infant. My mother, I think, worked for the government in some capacity. On my mother's side, my grandfather had a senior position in the ministry of agriculture. He also owned a small farm, about 75 acres, not far from Riga in a town with the interesting name of Ogre, and that's where there are some pictures of me as a little kid, two years and younger, being chased by geese and that sort of thing. On my father's side, my grandfather was a notary and owned an attractive wooden house near the center of Riga that now houses a music school. So it was a family with some roots in the countryside and farming as well as having some professional education and working for the government too.

Q: Do you know anything about the details of your mother going with you to Germany, and were there any other children?

SILINS: There were no other children. I was an only child, and since I was only two years old when we left Latvia I don't have any recollection of what happened in Latvia before we left. It might seem odd that I know so little about it now, but after I was old enough to talk to my mother about such things, this is now of course in the States, when I asked about our life in Latvia and what happened to my father and so forth, it was obviously very stressful for her, it would make her cry, and so I learned to avoid the subject.

Q: This is often the case in so many families who went through that, you know, horrendous time. When do you start remembering things, what do you remember?

SILINS: Well, I remember quite a lot beginning with our arrival in the United States. I remember the trip to the U.S. vividly. We were very fortunate; we got a seat on a returning American plane, we didn't even have to go by ship as did most refugees, we flew to the U.S. I was just seven years old at the time, and that was very exciting.

Q: This would have been about '49?

SILINS: Summer of '49, July of '49.

Q: This would be under the Displaced Persons Act or something like that?

SILINS: I believe so, and thanks also to the Lutheran Relief Service. We had found a sponsor, or rather a sponsor family had been found for us. A wonderful Quaker couple, the Arthur Silvers, had sponsored us, meaning that they offered my mother a job and a place for us to live. And so we got seats on the plane. I still remember staying awake the whole flight, gazing out the window at the magical clouds. I remember we stopped off at Gander and then flew into New York City. So that was very exciting, I've loved flying ever since.

Q: Where did you go? Where were the Silvers located?

SILINS: They had a country place in Darlington, Maryland, not too far from Baltimore, although I think their main home was in Philadelphia, where we visited them much later. My mother had been meant to care for one of the Silvers' elderly parents, but the lady died just before we reached the U.S. My mother then worked for a year or so for two schoolteachers in Towson, Maryland, the McGuigan sisters. Then she was hired as a cook and housekeeper by Guy Holliday, who was administrator of the FHA, the Federal Housing Administration. He had a sizeable farm, also near Towson, with a stable of horses. His daughter Pat taught riding. I too learned to ride there and even had my designated pony, Puss N'Boots. All these were wonderful places so I've been very lucky as a kid as to where I lived.

Q: Sounds like you grew up around horses.

SILINS: Oh, it was fantastic, really, and it gets better as we go but it started off very well too. Needless to say, the picture was not quite so rosy from my mother's point of view. She had gone from a comfortable middle-class life in Latvia to being a servant, basically, until her English was strong enough for her to get back into white-collar work.

Q: Well, in Maryland, where did you go to school?

SILINS: I attended Towson public elementary school.

Q: Did you have any problem with the language?

SILINS: I knew only a few words of English when I came to the States in July of '49 and I certainly did have trouble when I first started school that September, but because I'd learned to read in Latvian during our time in DP camps I quickly rose to the Dick and Jane level of reading in English. So I was moved up to the second grade after a few months. I still have an oddly vivid memory of the day I was first brought to the second-grade classroom. The teacher evidently didn't know how to fit me in immediately, so she told me to sit in the back and write down numbers on a sheet of paper, starting with one and going as high as I could. I think I reached 149. Pretty soon I spoke English okay, but with an accent, of course, for the first few years, and I remember being teased a bit about that. Mostly people thought I was German, which was not a great thing to be at the time.

Q: I'm sure trying to explain Latvia was no better.

SILINS: It was beyond my powers.

Q: So, pretty much through your elementary education you were in Maryland schools?

SILINS: Right up through junior high school we were in the general Baltimore-Washington area. By the time I was in junior high school we had moved to, let's see, Riverdale, Maryland, which is on the outskirts of Washington, and I was going to Greenbelt Junior High, about which I remember just three or four things: pitching pennies and playing mumblety-peg with pocketknives during recess; a band instructor, Mr. Dawson, who was mercilessly tormented by his students; sitting in the back of the classroom a lot doing "independent reading" as the class focused on something I was presumed to know; and an outstanding, pretty English teacher.

Then something really quite remarkable happened, namely, I was discovered by an American millionaire. His name was Keith Merrill and he and his wife Katherine Ayer Merrill had an enormous property in Fairfax County, Virginia. It was called "Southdown." It was truly vast; it must have been at least half a mile deep from the road to the Potomac River. The property is still there and it still bears the name Southdown, but it's been subdivided and in fact some Foreign Service officers built homes there, for example, Warren Zimmerman, former ambassador to Yugoslavia.

Q: Yes, yes, I remember, it's on the Potomac.

SILINS: Nearby is what has now become a famous regional restaurant, L'Auberge Chez Francois. It occupies what used to be a general store, a gas station and then briefly an antiques shop. Keith Merrill had Latvians working for him on his estate. The man who ran for Merrill what was, I suppose, essentially a tax loss farm, was a Latvian named Augusts Zauermanis. He was a wonderful local character, very tough, colorfully profane, handy with machinery and firearms, and a great drinker. A tempting role model, needless to say, for a teenage boy. There was also a Latvian widow working on that property with a boy about two years younger than I, named George Klints. Merrill apparently thought very highly of them all and therefore became positively inclined toward Latvians in general. Somehow my mother made contact with the Southdown Latvians and I began going out there for extensive visits, especially in the summer. It was absolute heaven for a teenager because it had horses, guns and farm machinery - it offered both play and work. In other words, we could earn money, we did things like weeding out the morning glories from the extensive rose hedges that lined the estate's long drive, we painted farm buildings, we helped bring in the hay. But we could also fool around with the farm Jeep or go fishing in the Potomac, so it was just a boys' paradise. If there's a more fun way to learn to drive than to be turned loose as a teenager, unsupervised, on a vast estate in a four-wheel drive Jeep, I can't imagine what it could be. Luckily, neither our reckless drives in the Jeep nor our other harebrained exploits, such as shooting flaming kerosene out of water pistols, caused permanent damage. My accidentally dropping a knife, point down, from a tree on George's head came close, though.

Q: So how long did this go on? Did you start high school by this time?

SILINS: I'd been going out to Southdown for a couple of years and was in the seventh or eighth grade, junior high school, when Keith Merrill asked to see my mother and me. He had gotten the idea of sending a Latvian boy to the school that he had attended, a boarding school called The Hill School in Pottstown, Pennsylvania. My friend George was still too young. I remember the interview with Merrill in his big, imposing house overlooking a pond. Merrill - or Commander Merrill, as he preferred to be addressed from his Navy service - was a country squire very much in the English style. He sported a fine silver moustache and drove a Jaguar when in Virginia. Until, that is, he accidentally ran over a favorite dog, a boxer, at Southdown. He got rid of the Jag immediately. He and his wife also owned homes in Prides Crossing, Massachusetts and at St. Croix in the U.S. Virgin Islands. I remember being pretty intimidated by the circumstances and was rather tongue-tied at the interview. Nevertheless I apparently passed his first scrutiny, and I know he was impressed with my mother. Then I had to take an admissions exam for Hill, which I also passed but not without anxiety since a lot was riding on this for me. And then I was admitted to Hill. My tuition there was paid not by Keith Merrill but from a General Motors scholarship. The Hill School was very small, only about 430 students all told, but at that time it was a really exceptionally good private school in Pottstown, Pennsylvania.

Q: Well, you were at The Hill School from when to when?

SILINS: I was there for three academic years and graduated in 1960, so it must have been from '57 to '60.

Q: Can you describe the atmosphere of the school and the faculty and all?

SILINS: Yes. The headmaster was named Edward Tuck Hall and he was an exceptionally competent and inspiring headmaster, normally appearing with a pipe clenched firmly between his teeth. His background was St. Mark's and Yale. He was making Hill into a model educational institution. My studies at Hill coincided with the whole Sputnik crisis in American education - that is, when the launching of the Soviet space satellite convinced us that the U.S. was falling behind in the sciences. The Hill School was one of those schools that became a laboratory for science teaching, the so-called PSSC (Physical Science Study Committee) approach to science teaching. Hill had gotten some extra funding and some good teachers and a good program. Academically it reached the cutting edge, as shown by its success in getting graduates into the leading universities. For example, when I graduated in 1960 my class had 123 students. Of those over 20 went to Yale, over 20 went to Princeton and five or so went to Harvard. For a school of that size that was just exceptional.

Q: Oh yes.

SILINS: The general atmosphere there, of course, was upper middle class. Most kids came from well-off families, some extremely so, with just a sprinkling of paupers like me. A few obsessed about their clothing but overall there was a minimum of snobbism and broad mixing, fostered in part by a vigorous sports program. I remember visiting one classmate whose parents' upper-floor apartment on Park Avenue seemed to cover an entire city block. I was certainly not at the cutting edge socially there, in fact, particularly the first year I felt very out of it. But I liked it very much right from the beginning because it was so good academically, it was not so snobbish that I couldn't make friends, and it clearly represented a very lucky break for me. I do remember a few classmates showing dismay at my grades the first year, because apparently a Gentleman's C was still supposed to be the thing that you did and I started getting pretty good grades right from the start. But it was a wonderful little school enjoying what in retrospect was probably its Golden Age. One of the very best things that ever happened to me. It really got me started academically.

Q: Oh yes. Well really it's the high school or the prep school that often makes the man or the woman, much more so than the university.

SILINS: I think that's often the case. And Hill worked hard at it, stressing the importance of character and values in addition to academics. Hill was modeled on an idealized version of a British public school - without the hazing, canings and other nastiness that apparently were all too common in English "public" i.e. private schools, but with the same declared mission of shaping boys into men with desirable characters. The "character-building" part of the Hill program, with the discipline and restrictions that it entailed, did begin to seem more confining and even claustrophobic to me by my final year there. After all, the '60s were upon us. I responded in the usual way with minor pranks and rebellions, for one of which I was sentenced to a job swabbing down the wrestling mats in the gym every week.

I now look on that process far more favorably - that is, the process of character-building, of inducing children to internalize values such as honesty, diligence, responsibility and generosity. The goal is to make them part of a person's identity, part of who you are, not things that have to be constantly enforced from outside. Working on the problem of corruption after my retirement has persuaded me that this creation of a social conscience is essential. Until most people have internalized such values, there cannot be enough police in the world to enforce them. And who will police the police?

There is a novel, Old School by Tobias Wolff, loosely based on The Hill School around the time I was there. It's fiction, of course, and not meant to be a reliable guide to what Hill was really like, although Wolff himself attended Hill. The book's cover photo, though, is genuine and gave me a real twinge of nostalgia. Taken from ceiling height, it shows the boys seated for dinner at white-covered tables in the wood-paneled dining room of The Headmaster's House, in coats and ties, their heads bowed during grace, a master seated at each end of the table. For all I know, I am somewhere in that picture. It certainly seems to be from a previous century, and it cannot be repeated because, sad to say, The Headmaster's House burned down many years ago.

Q: Were you involved with the sciences or what courses were you taking?

SILINS: At Hill I was interested in both the sciences and in the liberal arts, as I am to this day. Hill had a two-year program called The Humanities, taught by an excellent teacher, Paul Chancellor, which covered literature and the classics, music, art and architecture. That course helped to civilize me a bit. As for languages, I studied Latin and German and wish now that I had studied ancient Greek as well. I took chemistry, physics, 'earth science' and some calculus under the PSSC program, which featured fascinating lab experiments. Indeed when I graduated I was planning to major in the sciences and decided to go to Princeton because it is very strong in both science and the liberal arts. Originally I was going to be an engineer but by the time I actually got to Princeton I thought, well, physics really has a somewhat wider scope and is more up my alley. In fact I changed course by 180 degrees by the time I graduated, winding up in philosophy.

Q: At Hill, was the world intruding at all? This was during the '60s, well, the '50s.

SILINS: No, the world was not intruding so much at Hill. Hill was up on its little hill. It was quite cut off from the rest of the world, which was not then as turbulent as it became later in the '60s. The town in which Hill is situated was not a magnet to the average Hill student. In fact, we were limited in how often we could go there. Only in the sixth form - the senior year - did you have some freedom of movement, and then the wealthier kids of course went to New York, not to Pottstown. But no, Hill was really a self-contained academic community, which happened to suit me to a T. I loved that.

Q: Did John O'Hara, wasn't he the man from Pottstown or something? The short story writer?

SILINS: From somewhere in Pennsylvania but I think not necessarily Pottstown. Pottstown, let's see, there's a baseball player whose name I now forget that was from Pottstown, and Pottstown was the home of Kiwi Shoe Polish, and that's about all I knew about it.

Q: Well, what type books were you reading, what you were doing it for?

SILINS: I think then as now I was pretty omnivorous. At Hill our assigned reading load was pretty heavy and I don't remember much of what I read on the side. Plato's Socratic Dialogues made a strong impression on me. That obviously affected my eventual turn to the study of philosophy. Socrates' search for wisdom through dialogue captured my imagination. I still value the Socratic method highly as a way to expose internal inconsistencies in one's thinking, but now the scientific method and pragmatic investigation - that is, learning from the world around us rather than just analyzing ideas and concepts - seem to me just as important.

Q: Well, at Princeton, I guess you were there from '60 to '64, was that it?

SILINS: I should have graduated in '64 but I took a year off and graduated in '65.

Q: At Princeton, you said you started off intending to be an engineer and then to study physics. What turned you around?

SILINS: Rightly or wrongly, I thought engineering would be too confining for me. My interest in physics developed very promisingly at first when I was picked for an honors course taught in part by John Wheeler, one of America's most brilliant physicists and a marvelous teacher whom I still revere. Well, I loved that course, which included doing classic experiments like measuring the speed of light (the Michelson-Morley experiment) and the charge on the electron (the Millikan oil drop experiment) and some study of relativity theory too. The realization soon dawned on me, however, that I was not in the same league as the brighter students in that group. The real coup de grace, though, came from another honors course into which I was placed, a super-accelerated calculus course. It's a course that Princeton subsequently abandoned; it did in half a year the amount of calculus that most universities cover in two years. For me it was a mistake. I'd had some calculus at Hill and thought I had a fairly good grasp of it, but I wasn't brilliant at it and that's what you had to be. By the end of the course my head was barely above water. So that really got me thinking, because of course math is absolutely vital in physics. The decisive moment came when we were studying the kinetic theory of gases. I was trying to derive the formula relating the temperature and pressure of a gas in a confined space from the physics of the movement of molecules, and the solution just refused to take shape in my mind. And about that time, perhaps because of the stress, I came down with ... Do you remember how it used to be popular to have an attack of mononucleosis?

Q: Oh yes. That was the student's disease.

SILINS: Right, right. Well, I got that, whatever it is, and withdrew from Princeton in the fall of my sophomore year. My first sophomore year, that is, since I came back to repeat it the next fall. It was probably more of an intellectual crisis than a physical one, but it was hitting me at a visceral level that I was heading in the wrong direction and so my body as well as my mind said whoa, you've got to do something else, you've got to work this out. And so I took a leave of absence from Princeton, Princeton's very understanding about these things. I went back to Washington, which is where my mother was living at that time, and found a job, a wonderful job, at the old Washington Evening Star newspaper.

Q: Ah, yes.

SILINS: A wonderful place to start off. A fairly sedate paper for the reader, but for young reporters it was superb because at that time people like Haynes Johnson and Dave Broder and Mary McGrory were there, the editors were sharp and willing to give pointers, so it was a great school of journalism. My position was called dictationist. I had started off as copy boy for a month; a copy boy simply distributes stuff and responds instantly to a shout of "COPY!" from a reporter or editor. A dictationist at the Star, which was an afternoon newspaper, sat at a U-shaped desk surrounding a telephone switchboard, strapped on a headset attached to a phone line and typed out news stories dictated by reporters who didn't have time to get back to the office. What came from our typewriters normally went to the rewrite desk for a final polish, then to the appropriate editor, then to the copy desk, and then to the composing room via a Rube Goldberg endless-belt conveyor, to be set in hot-lead Linotype. The idea was to get the story to press for the evening edition. Today's news today. That was the basic function, and it sometimes involved giving the reporter a hand in writing up his material or doing instant research for him or her. There were about half a dozen dictationists. One was Carl Bernstein, who became famous with Bob Woodward for their Watergate revelations as investigative reporters for the Washington Post. We also did some cub reporting and we did obituaries and we did feature stories. And I remember every week going to cover citizens' associations and reporting on them, their discussions about urban renewal or other neighborhood issues. All this time I was bombing around in an olive drab 1950 Dodge that I had bought for $100, from a lady on her deathbed at the National Institutes of Health. And it was just a wonderful job, it was really a great thing. I almost decided to go into journalism as a result of that.

Q: Well, you did that what, for about a year?

SILINS: I did that for most of a year before I went back to Princeton, and then I worked at the Star for the two summers after my sophomore and junior years.

Q: Well, when you went back to Princeton, what were you up to?

SILINS: Well, when I went back, as I said, I changed direction and went into philosophy, which actually isn't that different from the sciences because it also involves a lot of analysis.

Q: What attracted you to philosophy? Many of the people one runs into in the Foreign Service may take political science or history, but philosophy is not a prime subject.

SILINS: Yes, it's not a leading major, is it? My basic reason for studying it was to hone my own thinking, to be able to think more clearly, spot false arguments, understand better the relations between ideas. I liked the fact that philosophy potentially overlaps both science and the humanities. C. P. Snow's article about the gap between the two cultures - science and the humanities - was a live topic. Snow deplored how little members of each culture knew about the basics of the other, with humanists being especially ignorant of elementary scientific facts and principles. I wanted to become reasonably well educated about both. And although I didn't really focus on the history of philosophy, I've always been interested in the ancient Greeks and of course philosophy began with them. Socrates is a big hero of mine.

Q: Was there any particular field of philosophy that you found yourself moving into?

SILINS: Theory of value became my focus - philosophy of art and moral philosophy, which I tried to relate in a disastrous senior paper. The core issues have to do with how statements of value such as "he is a good man" or "this is a beautiful piece of music" are related to statements of fact about those same things. Also theory of knowledge, which our son Nicholas, who also went to Princeton and then Oxford, now concentrates on as a professor of philosophy. And of course philosophy of science, in which I took a course from the eminent Carl Hempel. I still enjoy philosophy and I liked very much some of the people that I worked with, that is, the professors at Princeton, one of whom is probably the person most responsible for my going into the Foreign Service.

That professor's name was Arthur Szathmary, and he was both a comic and a heroic figure. Humor ran in his family, I guess. His brother was a professional comedian, the man who created the once-popular Jose Jimenez character, and Szathmary was himself very witty and amusing. Heroic because he had suffered a stroke a few years earlier and had lost his ability to speak. He had to learn it all over again and did it well enough to be able to continue to teach. He was quite frail and walked with a slight limp, often using a cane. I remember vividly one day, this would have been the spring of 1965, my last year at Princeton. Professor Szathmary and I were taking a walk along Lake Carnegie and, with my graduation approaching, chatting about my future. The U.S. was having a crisis with the Dominican Republic. I believe we had just invaded it, actually. When the subject came up, Professor Szathmary turned to me, leaned on his cane, and said with an unusual emphasis, "You know, Ints, I think you could handle that sort of thing better." I took that to be his way of suggesting - you know, philosophy may not be your destined field, why don't you see if you can make a contribution in international affairs?

Q: Well again, I'll ask about the world intruding, as far as what was happening. These were the Kennedy and Johnson years, there were involvements with the Soviet Union, with Vietnam, the Dominican Republic and all, Peace Corps and of course, here in the United States, the Civil Rights Movement was getting cranked up. Did this impact much personally for you?

SILINS: I was committed at Princeton as I was at The Hill School to the notion of a self-contained academic environment. Of course the external world would intrude, but my belief at the time was that the intrusion should be minimal because we were here for only a few years to study and learn and that's what I was concentrating on. So I tried not to let it intrude any more than necessary. Also, Princeton was perhaps less affected than some schools by what was going on in the early '60s. The drug scene had not yet arrived or at least only in a very limited way. Princeton was not co-educational, it had only the beginnings of a female presence in the so-called Critical Language Program. I think in my senior year the CLP only contained 14 women, so Princeton was still a men's school and more inward looking than outward looking. My pact with myself was, I was going to focus on academic things and then after I graduated, that would be the time to deal with the outer world. It wasn't that I didn't want to deal with it at all, I just didn't want to deal with it now, I didn't want to deal with it then.

Q: Also, do you feel that something that often happens, a young person, male or female, coming from a family that has emigrated and starting all over again and not having a lot of money behind them, takes a more serious look at the system and doesn't have the self-indulgence that people who are sort of to the manor born have and all?

SILINS: Well, that might be one generous way of describing it but there's another way, and that is that someone like myself without any family money at all appreciates more the environment of the university but also therefore relishes it more, indulges more in it than others would who have a lot of other interesting choices to go off to. Some of my friends went almost weekly to New York. That was where they had a good time. I didn't have those options so I tried to get the most out of my time in the, to me, idyllic setting of Princeton University. Maybe it's worth mentioning that my son Nicholas, who had a... let's say, more sophisticated childhood than I, growing up as a Foreign Service brat and going to school in Port au Prince, Leningrad, Strasbourg and Stockholm, he was far less star-struck by Princeton than I. In fact, he insisted on living off campus. He even seemed pretty blasï¿½ later about Oxford.

I don't mean to imply that I did nothing but study. I made some trips to New York, a visit or two to nearby women's colleges, and I joined in the sometimes excessive drinking at the occasional weekend parties at the university eating clubs. I read the New York Times regularly and kept up with what was happening in the world outside. But I felt no impulse to launch myself into that world until my education was more complete.

Civil rights? Well, in my sophomore year I did turn down an invitation to join one of Princeton's top eating clubs when I learned it had voted not to admit one of the university's few African-Americans, an outstanding young man, solely because of his race. Their explanation was, sorry, it would upset the club's numerous Southern alumni; that is, cause them to reduce the financial support that enabled Cottage Club to maintain its status. I don't claim crusader status on the basis of this act, however. The club across from it on Prospect Street that I did join, Colonial Club, was architecturally the spitting image of a Southern slave-owner's mansion and did not, as I recall, have any black members when I joined.

Drug use? Not by me, but if you were to examine a special edition of the Nassau Lit dedicated to the critic R.P. Blackmur that I co-edited with Paul Boorstin, you might wonder where the inspiration for its layout and design came from. It was done by John Mason, and he never did explain what those creepy-crawly things on the margins were supposed to be and why the format needed to be so large.

Q: You graduated in 1965. By that time, what were you thinking of doing?

SILINS: Well, I should have been thinking about the Foreign Service, which is where Arthur Szathmary was trying to point me, but I decided to continue for a bit with philosophy because I didn't feel I had a firm enough grip on it yet. At first I thought, aha, why don't I go study Greek philosophy in Athens? A rather naï¿½ve idea that Gregory Vlastos, Princeton's philosophy department chairman, himself Greek and one of the world's top experts on Greek philosophy, easily talked me out of. With perhaps an assist from Stuart Hampshire, he arranged a last-minute graduate position for me at University College London, where I began to study British analytical philosophy under Richard Wollheim. But it was not meant to be. My studies seemed repetitive to me, and then my stepfather died. My mother a few years earlier had remarried, to a Latvian widower, Bruno Ozolins, who was working as a tugboat captain. He was a warm, kind man, a great comfort to her. But Bruno died suddenly of a heart attack in March 1966, leaving my mother alone again and with very limited income. Clearly it was time for me to get back to the U.S. and enter the real world. So I headed back and decided to take the Foreign Service exam as soon as I could, I think it was given that summer, with the intention of joining the Foreign Service if I passed.

Q: Well, I mean, here you were sort of off in one direction, the Foreign Service seemed to be, even though people might have hinted that it might be a good idea, it didn't seem to have particularly crossed your path in anything you were doing.

SILINS: Well, it hadn't crossed my path literally, but the concept certainly had. I mean, I was foreign born to begin with and by that time my foreign languages included French and German. I guess at the core I had two motivations. One was adventure, the other was service. And of course both are captured in the name, Foreign Service. Service for me was important because, as I tried to suggest, I felt very privileged by the way that the U.S. had received me. From the time I arrived at the age of seven I'd been very fortunate and I'd lived in wonderful, comfortable surroundings, even though we started off with no money at all, and I'd gotten a great education. I thought it was time to sort of pay some of that back. The other element was adventure and curiosity. I loved the idea of a career that would train me to live and work in foreign countries, to speak their languages and to understand them from the inside. I couldn't think of a better way to spend my life than that. And if I could do that while serving the country that had given me so much, then that was a perfect combination.

Q: Well, you took the exam in '66?

SILINS: Right.

Q: By the way, had you met any Foreign Service types? Anybody, recruiters or people you knew or anything of this nature?

SILINS: No, I don't recall any contacts with someone actually in the Foreign Service. Nora Lejins, the wife of a Latvian relative of mine, was I believe the head of language services for the State Department, but she was a linguist and I don't recall her trying to steer me toward the Foreign Service before I decided on it myself.

Q: Well then, did you pass the exam in '66?

SILINS: I passed the written exam and then I was given the oral exam that fall, if I remember correctly. I was convinced that I'd flunked it because back in those days, you may recall that the oral exam was fairly aggressive. One of the things they did was to zero in on areas where they knew you were ignorant.

Q: I used to give that exam about 10 years later and it was still the three people and yes, we would. We figured yes, he knows this, let's go after this.

SILINS: Well, that's exactly what they did, and what they quite correctly concluded was that I knew too little about economics and too little about American history. And so they raked me over the coals on that for a while. Outerbridge Horsey was the chairman of the panel, pretty imposing name.

Q: Oh, yes. Do you recall any of the questions?

SILINS: The ones I recall are the ones I didn't know the answers to. One was about the Kennedy Round of tariff negotiations and whether there was a difference in its benefits for small as opposed to large countries. I had no idea then and no idea now what the answer is to that.

Q: Yes, you see a stunned look on my face too.

SILINS: Right. No idea at all on that one. Another one I remember was not really a question but a task. Trace for us if you would, Mr. Silins, the expansion of the United States to the west and name the major acquisitions of territory. Well, I stumbled around that a bit and didn't get much past the Louisiana Purchase. And so I thought afterwards that Outerbridge was going to tell me, nice try but no dice. In fact he didn't, he said that I'd passed and I was quite amazed.

Q: So you came into the Foreign Service when?

SILINS: Not immediately because at that time they weren't hiring for budget reasons. It was then called "balance of payments problems."

Q: BALPA.

SILINS: Right. And there was also my military obligation to be settled. The Vietnam War was still raging, of course. I was enlisted in the Army Reserve and now that I was no longer a student, I had to do my active duty for training, around six or eight months. And so that still had to be scheduled. But in any case the State Department wasn't hiring at the time. At some point well after I passed the orals I received a letter from State which said essentially, well, we're not hiring now and we don't know when we will be hiring, but if you're willing to sign on for a year to an assignment in Vietnam on loan to AID (Agency for International Development), we'll bring you directly into a Foreign Service position right after that. And frankly, I didn't hesitate too long. Not because I was an enthusiastic supporter of our Vietnam policy but for motives parallel to those that pulled me toward the Foreign Service, service and adventure. I might well have volunteered to go to Vietnam as my first Foreign Service assignment even without such a coercive letter - which, by the way, greatly aggravated a number of prospective young officers, who did not want an assignment to Vietnam. Quite understandably. They were absolutely right to object. To me, though, it seemed that our government was already trying its damnedest to get out of Vietnam, the war had to wind down soon, and I wanted to go and learn firsthand what I could about this traumatic, historic episode in American history before we withdrew.

Q: So you went to Vietnam, this is what...?

SILINS: I actually joined the State Department in 1969.

Q: So you went to Vietnam in '69?

SILINS: No, in '70. I spent a year in Rosslyn, mostly in the basement of Arlington Towers, being trained for Vietnam, learning Vietnamese and how the pacification program worked that I would be working in.

Q: Let's see. If you graduated in '66, what were you doing in between?

SILINS: Aside from military training at Fort Jackson, South Carolina, which took up the better part of a year, I was working as an editor, a technical editor, at an outfit called the Research Analysis Corporation in McLean, Virginia. They did some work for the military and some for private companies, about half and half. I found some of the reports interesting and educational. One I edited was a comparative study of all the different kinds of internal combustion engines, the Wankel engine, the reciprocating piston engine, the diesel engine, the rotary engine, with a comparison of efficiencies and costs and so forth. To most people it might seem painful but I kind of enjoyed it because I was learning something new. Also, I was the only male editor among some interesting young women. I got pretty good at editing, although it seems to have made it harder for me to do my own writing.

Q: So, from sort of '69-'70, you were taking Vietnamese, is that it?

SILINS: Right. Taking Vietnamese and being trained to be a district advisor in the so-called pacification program.

Q: Can you talk a bit about the training of people there and the outlook at that point towards Vietnam?

SILINS: Well, I've called this the most painful period of my life, painful not in a profound sense but in the sense that it was boring and restrictive. The way that Vietnamese was taught there was boring to me because of the narrow range of the vocabulary and the expressions they focused on. It was designed primarily for military people - most of the men doing the job I was headed for were young captains and majorr - so it had a lot of military lingo, you know, not the kind of things that I was interested in saying, actually.

My own views on Vietnam were very mixed at the time. I felt that we had made a big mistake in getting in. At the same time I felt that in some sense we were on the right side, which I still feel today, but of course not that we should have killed so many people trying to support that side. I agreed to go in part because by then it was already clear that we were pulling out. I mean, we'd started to withdraw well before '69. So I was torn. I was willing to go because it was something that my country, the U.S., was doing and I was willing to do my part in it, but I didn't feel it was a good thing to have gotten into. At the same time I wasn't all that impressed with the anti-war movement. So it was a very uncomfortable period. A boring training program, these mixed, divided feelings, mixed emotions and waiting and waiting until the training would end and I could finally leave for Vietnam. It was a difficult time.

Q: When did you arrive in Vietnam?

SILINS: I think it was in June of 1970. I did some personal travel on my way toward the Pacific in late spring, including a memorable motorcycle trip with a friend around Pike's Peak in Colorado. Then, since I had another friend in L.A. and was curious about the mood on college campuses, I did a "comparison visit" to UCLA and Berkeley. Quite a contrast. From UCLA the dominant image I retain is a placid scene of beautiful sunbathing coeds. Berkeley of course was agitated as usual by demonstrations, not against the war on that day but in protest of alleged exploitation of university employees. After this I linked up with a small group of Vietnam-bound Foreign Service officers. We made rather self-indulgent tourist stops en route in Hawaii and Japan, visiting both Tokyo and Kyoto and a lot of territory between. As you might imagine, we justified all this to ourselves on the argument that we might die in Vietnam. Our fun over, we proceeded to Taiwan for training in tropical agriculture, Miracle Rice and a little bit about the kind of light industry that might work in Vietnam. Then off to Saigon.

Q: Well, this was a relatively quiet period, I guess, wasn't it?

SILINS: Depends on where you were. It wasn't all that quiet. Just before I left Washington, the night I was driving my airfreight to Andrews Air Force base, the radio started broadcasting news about U.S. bombing of Cambodia. That was an expansion of the military conflict and made my mother, who had lost my father in another war, very nervous.

Like everyone else, the first thing I remember after landing at Saigon's Tan Son Nhat Airport was a blast of tropical heat and the shriek of jet engines. I have fragmented memories of my first disoriented days in Saigon. Being knocked off my feet, unhurt, by a car while walking along a sidewalk, the Vietnamese occupants jumping out, smiling and laughing, not out of amusement but acute embarrassment and apology. A Vietnamese woman invading my room in the middle of the night in a fleabag hotel, just looking, it turned out, for a place to sleep until morning. Another fleabag hotel where I awoke with large cockroaches nibbling on my eyebrows. And so forth. Welcome to Vietnam. The fleabag hotels, by the way, were not places of my own choosing but where I was assigned to stay by my employer, the CORDS program.

Q: Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support.

SILINS: Right. Our Saigon processing-in included a pep talk from the famous John Paul Vann, then the golden boy of the pacification program. He was later dissected in Neil Sheehan's A Bright Shining Lie. CORDS then sent us off on an orientation trip to various districts and provinces in different parts of South Vietnam. In one of them we came under mortar attack, a reminder, if we needed one, there was still a war on. And I was issued a Colt 45, which I carried for a few months. But then, I have to say luckily, I was assigned to a very peaceful model district, where I replaced Ken Quinn as District Senior Advisor. And there I formed at first a rather distorted view of the war and its prospects. It was in Sa Dec Province in the Mekong Delta, flat as a board, between the Bassac and Mekong Rivers, not more than a few meters above water level at any time, a good deal of it underwater in the rainy season.

The district was called Duc Thanh District. It was controlled by the Hoa Hao, a Buddhist sect that was very anti-Viet Cong, so they kept most of the war at bay. It was prosperous, with rich soil, rice agriculture and some other crops, animal husbandry, handicrafts and light manufacturing. What I was doing there was basically AID and Peace Corps-type work. I was the head of a small team reporting to the province senior advisor, Bob Traister. His deputy, who wrote my efficiency report, was an Army lieutenant colonel. I had a Filipino agricultural advisor who was spreading the green revolution. You remember IR8, one of the new rice varieties that were supposed to revolutionize the world's food supply? My villagers were skeptical and didn't care all that much for the taste. And we were building roads and bridges and schools and little dispensaries, medical treatment centers, and so forth.

Much of our travel was by boat, a Boston Whaler with a temperamental motor. I also had an International Scout, the SUV of the time, which I eventually traded for a real Army jeep. With my counterpart, the Vietnamese District Chief, I made regular visits to the villages and hamlets to inquire into their problems, needs and wishes. All too often an inescapable part of such official visits was heavy drinking, usually warm brandy and soda in very large glasses, and occasionally exotic foods such as seven-day-old duck eggs and field mice. We had a fairly comfortable compound with a generator but showered in canal water from a rooftop tank settled out with alum. I also had a small military training team consisting of a lieutenant named Al Heckman, a sergeant, and about four enlisted men whose job was to strengthen the local self-defense forces as part of the Vietnamization policy. Except for a little nibbling around the edges of the district, there was no Viet Cong activity, no war. We had neither U.S. nor Vietnamese regular forces operating in our territory. That was fortunate for all concerned but it encouraged an overly rosy picture of what was really happening in Vietnam.

The most violent military activity in my district, I regret to say, came when a U.S. helicopter, its crew having blown an emotional fuse as a result of combat trauma, flew over Duc Thanh and sprayed some villages at random with machine gun fire. Luckily, they hit only houses, not people. An Army team came to investigate and offer compensation. They brought along a beautiful Vietnamese girl, Phuong, as an interpreter. She was wearing a flowing snow-white ao dai and delicate shoes, so I carried her over the muddy stretches and narrow bamboo bridges as we went from hamlet to hamlet. She was light as a cloud.

Another close call with friendly fire came when Secretary of the Army Stan Resor came on a visit to our model district. Luckily I was monitoring the military radio as our motorcade approached the village where Resor was to meet with a unit of the local forces we had been training. One of the helicopter gunships escorting him reported "suspected hostiles wearing black pajamas" near the meeting point and requested permission to fire on them. I broke in and stopped them. The guys in black were the self-defense forces the Secretary had come to see.

Q: You were in Vietnam from 1970 to...?

SILINS: To January of '73. I left right after the signing of the so-called peace agreement.

Q: What was your impression of the Vietnamese government, the GVN (Government of the Republic of Vietnam), in your area?

SILINS: In my area, in the first year, it was favorable. I worked hand in hand with the district chief, who was a Vietnamese Army major. He was a northerner, a Catholic refugee from North Vietnam. He was quite effective, honest as far as I could tell, pretty efficient, good-natured and seemed to be accepted by the village and hamlet chiefs. He made a point of regularly spending the night in the less secure border hamlets to "show the flag." Sometimes I would accompany him. I still remember a walk through one of the more iffy hamlets. My presence always attracted young children, who were generally allowed to roam at will, in droves. The hair on my arms fascinated them. At one end - the good end - of the hamlet, the kids swarmed around me, laughing and joking. As we walked through the middle, they became quieter and began to drop away. As we approached the far end, nearest the district border, mothers ran out of the house to snatch their children inside as we came near. It meant the VC had a presence there, and the parents were afraid of letting their children appear to be friendly toward U.S. or GVN officials.

But aside from these little warning signs, the place was humming, the war was not a problem, and it seemed not entirely lunatic to hope we could spread that happy state to the rest of South Vietnam. If peace and prosperity could prevail in Duc Thanh, why not elsewhere? Well, for lots of reasons, as became clearer to me later.

I did not spend my entire Vietnam assignment in the Mekong Delta. Well before my first year was up, I was picked to serve as the aide to Ambassador Ellsworth Bunker in Saigon... perhaps because I was the only candidate who showed up for the interview in a dark suit. Ambassador Bunker was a rather formal man.

Q: Oh yes, yes - the aide, which is a very good job, but it was done with a certain amount of propriety and all that. Walt Cutler was one, and others had gone through that.

SILINS: It was a wonderful opportunity for me. So I got to see the war from the rice shoots level and also from the top.

But to continue with your previous question, my impression of the Vietnamese government.... When Ambassador Bunker went on one of his consultation trips to the U.S. and expected to be away for some time, this was after I'd been working for him for about a year, with his permission and authority I took my own little research trip in Vietnam. I visited parts of the country that I hadn't seen before, especially farther north, in Military Regions I and II. I talked to district advisors in depth, saw what the situation was like and got their candid assessments of how representatives of the Vietnamese government were performing. Having been one, I knew what to ask them. I wrote a short report for the ambassador concluding that our policy just wasn't going to work, that the political structure we were trying to build simply would not hold together unless the Vietnamese government made some basic changes. It was clear to me that aside from oases of security like Duc Thanh, things were not going well at all, as we now know.

Q: What was the problem?

SILINS: Well, there were several. Corruption, insufficient motivation. Lack of trust in the Thieu regime and its representatives. Resentment of the foreign military presence. A growing conviction that U.S. forces would be worn down as the French had been before them. A basic problem was that Vietnamese government officials were seen as, and perceived themselves as being, puppets of a foreign power, which was a fatal problem in Vietnam over the long run. We could not impose a solution from the outside, because the attempt to do that, for people as intensely patriotic, really, and xenophobic to some extent, as the Vietnamese are, would cause the government agents that worked for us to be seen as puppets of a foreign power. That was a fatal flaw, such a program could not win lasting popular support.

As I recall, my report sat on Ambassador Bunker's desk for the space of a week or so, then he returned it to me. I don't recall that he made any comment on it. It was not, of course, the only negative assessment of U.S. prospects in Vietnam that he read, as I know very well since I selected much of his daily reading and put the papers on his desk every day.

Q: What was your impression of Ambassador Bunker?

SILINS: He had the most impressive presence of any diplomat that I have worked with. Of course, he was the first one of world class that I worked with closely when I was still in my impressionable youth, but he was exceptional. He had great power of recall. He could recognize Marines that had served for him when he was ambassador to India when they came through Vietnam and wound up on his security guard. So, a superb memory. When I started working for him he was already 75, 76, something like that, but with plenty of energy. He worked six-and-a-half days a week without fail, long hours.

The most impressive thing about Bunker was something that to this day I can't really explain, and that was an ability to get people to do things without overtly asking or telling them what he wanted them to do. That is the true genius of leadership, when you can get people to imagine for themselves what it is you want them to do and do it accurately... that's just something extraordinary, I don't know how he did that. He did it with me as his aide, but he could also do it with the very senior Americans that formed the Mission Council. I saw him in action because I had the privilege of sitting in on Mission Council meetings for almost two years, but to this day I am not sure how he was able to lead in that indirect way.

Perhaps I should mention here the "honeymoon flights." These were the shuttle flights between Saigon and Katmandu that were a unique feature of Bunker's tenure in Saigon. They came about because Bunker's second wife, Carol Laise, was the U.S. ambassador to Nepal. They married in Katmandu in early 1967. President Johnson, when he pressured Bunker into taking on the Vietnam job not long after the wedding, promised that a government plane would be provided for regular, shall we say, conjugal visits. The flights continued into the Nixon administration. So every few months Bunker would fly to Nepal or Carol Laise would come to Saigon. There were always quite a lot of extra seats, so members of both U.S. missions alternated on R & R trips. I went on one of the longer ones, with the additional duty of escorting Bunker's lithe and spirited granddaughter from Brazil. I almost got her killed. I think her name was Patsy.

Q: What happened?

SILINS: I was staying with the Peace Corps doctor in Katmandu, who organized a motorcycle outing. We were coming back from the Tibet border, with the young lady riding on the back of my bike. The road, like almost all roads in Nepal, as you can imagine, was narrow with a vertical wall on one side and a steep drop on the other. A water buffalo was moving along the road ahead of us, placidly trudging along in the same direction as us, hugging the safe side. As we were about to pass, suddenly it lurched into the middle of the road, almost knocking us over the edge. I guess it was startled by the motorcycle's engine noise. With miraculous luck neither of us suffered more than minor scrapes.

I still remember those ten days or so in Nepal very vividly. It's sad to think how much Nepal must have changed by now.

Q: Well, let's turn back to Vietnam. What was your impression of, say, the Mission Council? There's often a split between the junior officers who are out in the field and are inclined to take a more cynical view of things, maybe more accurate, and the senior officers who have been around, seen it all and take imperfections without being too upset by them and see a different world. I mean, did you see that?

SILINS: Oh sure. There were sharp divisions, there were chasms between groups of people in the U.S. mission in Vietnam. But these differences were not debated at Mission Council meetings, which is where the topmost officials - the Ambassador and Deputy Ambassador, the CIA station chief, the commander of U.S. forces, the head of USIA, the head of the pacification program, and so forth - met, mostly to consecrate policy lines that had already been agreed upon. There were also lower-level country team meetings within the embassy that I did not attend, so I can't say to what extent differing views were expressed there. I know that many political officers thought our cause was doomed and were trying to report that, but were totally ignored, really. Even the minister-counselor for political affairs, as far as I could tell, had no direct impact on policy.

Q: Who was that?

SILINS: Bill Hitchcock. Below him there was, as I recall, another political counselor, Lauren Askew. There was skepticism about our policy among the CIA personnel, but I never heard the station chief, Ted Shackley and then Tom Polgar, express that at the Mission Council meetings. But then, I wouldn't expect them to. That was not what those meetings were for.

U.S. policy was run out of the White House, that was clear to me from the start. Some policy messages were ultra-sensitive. I was not allowed to see the back-channel communications that passed between Kissinger and Bunker and Nixon and Bunker. Those messages came in CIA channels, usually delivered personally by Ted Shackley. That's how policy was conveyed.

Q: What was the atmosphere between the political section and the ambassador's office? Did they seem to be on a different course than, say, the CIA or the military?

SILINS: I'm not sure I should make sweeping characterizations here. I think most of the political section felt that the situation was not sustainable and they also felt that their views were not being adequately taken into account in the formulation of policy. And they kept trying to get these views to the ambassador, including through me, of course. The ambassador would occasionally see them, but it didn't change U.S. policy at all, in fact, it couldn't have because the person they had to get to, of course, was Nixon or Kissinger, not Bunker. Bunker was not going to send a cable to Nixon saying, "You know, Mr. President, my political section has just persuaded me that we are on a fool's errand here. Let's change course!" Anyway, it's clearer to me now than it was then that Bunker himself was a convinced hawk on Vietnam and was pretty much beyond persuasion.

As to what the views of the CIA were, I think they were trying to do the job they were being asked to do. My impression was they were less inclined openly to challenge established policy. A well-known exception to that, somebody I had regular contact with, was Frank Snepp, a CIA strategy analyst in Saigon who interrogated prisoners and debriefed agents. He saw disaster looming and, after Saigon finally collapsed, wrote a gripping, controversial book, Decent Interval, which earned him a great deal of grief from the Agency for allegedly violating his secrecy oath. So there were people with widely different views, but often they kept them to themselves.

Q: As you traveled around, did there seem to be an embassy point of view of the situation and a field point of view and were there differences there?

SILINS: Well, the general feeling was, I think this is accurate, that the Saigon establishment was trying to impose an optimistic view on everybody else and was fiddling with the various complicated, sophisticated programs of analysis that we had, like the HES, the Hamlet Evaluation System, was trying to jiggle them to produce a positive trend line. People out in the field felt under pressure to show constant and steady progress. I think that's true, there was that pressure and of course things fell apart in the end partly because the picture we were relying on was not entirely accurate.

Q: What was your feeling about the Foreign Service? This is your first post there and how things were done and all and you're really at the center of the major focus of American foreign policy at this time.

SILINS: Well, I knew it wasn't a typical Foreign Service post. As I say, it was clear to me from the start that U.S. policy was not coming out of the State Department, the State Department had little decisive effect on our Vietnam policy except for providing some very talented people to carry it out. The policy was being run from the White House and the NSC (National Security Council). I preferred to believe and hope that Embassy Saigon was not a model of what I had to look forward to in my future Foreign Service career.

Perhaps I should mention that at the time, the group of people that most impressed me in Vietnam was not the Foreign Service, was not AID, it wasn't CIA - it was the young and mid-grade military officers who volunteered to be advisors in the pacification program. I met a lot of those guys because, first of all, I had that job myself and secondly, I took that tour when the ambassador was away and met a lot more of them up north. These captains and majors were smart, they were dedicated, they were brave; they took a lot of chances and they did it for little payback. It was not a career-enhancing move for them, they were not getting promoted for being advisors. Promotions came faster to officers with combat and command experience. They knew that, but they still did a good job, almost all of them. My hat's off to them.

Q: Did you, from your position sitting at the desk outside of the ambassador's office, have any feel about how the embassy operated with the two governments?

SILINS: Oh yes. I was the guy who would call the Presidential Palace when Ambassador Bunker wanted to see President Thieu. My contact was Thieu's aide, Hoang Duc Nha. We tried to be polite but to exert pressure where we could. Of course we were sometimes deeply involved in trying to steer political affairs in that country.

An episode that sticks in my mind relates to Vietnam's presidential election of 1971. Ambassador Bunker had returned to the embassy from a meeting with an opposition leader, General Duong Van Minh, usually called Big Minh. Minh had briefly been president himself after the overthrow of Diem in 1963, and he was the sole remaining candidate who might run against Thieu. We were urging him to stay in the race so there would be a contested democratic election for the presidency. Minh, being no fool, saw he was sure to lose and didn't want to run. He thought the deck was stacked against him. Bunker went to see him. When he returned to the embassy, he dictated a memorandum of conversation, a memcon, to his secretary Eva Kim - who, by the way, is the best secretary I've worked with in the Foreign Service.

Q: Oh yes, she has a great reputation.

SILINS: Eva typed it up and took the memcon in to the ambassador's office. The ambassador then did something unusual. He called me in and handed it to me to read over. He said he wanted to know "if it was hanging together properly." He had never done anything of the sort before.

I read it over. It was not long. Bunker had summarized two conversations, a plenary meeting with Minh and several other participants, and a private one-on-one meeting between the ambassador and Big Minh. According to the memcon, though, Bunker had just repeated to Big Minh privately more or less verbatim the arguments for why Minh should stay in the race that he had already used in the plenary meeting. Puzzled, I went back in to the ambassador and pointed this out. I said it didn't ring true, there was something odd about this. Why would he just repeat himself? Bunker seemed a bit flustered and took the memcon back. I'm not sure what happened to it afterwards but I now know, as I did not at the time, what was going on. This was the meeting in which Bunker offered Minh money to stay in the election. I guess Bunker was using me as a litmus test to see if his sanitized report would pass muster.

Q: What was the feeling about how well the economic stability of Vietnam was going, the economic side during this time you were there?

SILINS: Well, a lot better than it was subsequently after the collapse. It depended very much on the region. Where I worked to begin with, the Mekong Delta, was quite prosperous, really. But then I visited deeply depressed areas and of course war-torn areas where people were very badly off. Saigon itself was thriving but that was because a lot of foreign money was coming in. So in general, I mean, the economy was not the problem. We didn't lose Vietnam because of economic collapse, that wasn't the decisive issue.

By the way, it still amazes me in retrospect what freedom of movement Americans enjoyed in much of Vietnam during the war. When assigned to Sa Dec Province, I traveled often to Saigon and back, usually unarmed and unaccompanied, and of course all around Duc Thanh District and elsewhere in the province - sometimes even by Vespa. When working at the Embassy, I made lots of trips inside and outside Saigon in my Embassy Toyota and almost never felt I was in danger. There were of course terrorist acts. When the Long Binh ammo dump was blown up, the shock wave knocked in my window air conditioner and damaged a number of windows at the Embassy. Explosions continued all day. A bar occasionally got blown up, and so forth. But a lot of Vietnam was safe for travel.

Q: What about the relationship during the '70-'73 period, particularly during your time between Bunker and the media, American media in particular?

SILINS: Yes. I used to talk to the media, newspaper and wire service reporters mostly, quite a lot. I can't say that I told them much they didn't know. I took almost too seriously my responsibility not to leak anything from the ambassador's office. But I liked them because I'd been in a humble way one of them way back when I worked for the Washington Star. They were interesting folks, they're smart and they know what's going on. So I would see reporters like Fox Butterfield of The New York Times or George McArthur of the AP often, but I probably wasn't much professional help to them, I'm afraid. Bunker met regularly with the press, including informal get-togethers, but neither side made much of a dent in the other. Bunker was restrained in expressing negative opinions of the press but I believe now, judging by statements in his own oral history interview, that he regarded a free uncensored press as a serious, potentially fatal, impediment to a democratic society's successful prosecution of a war.

Q: And what was your feeling about what AID was doing at this point?

SILINS: Well, I'd worked for AID for about nine months and I think some of what they were doing was fine, but it was predicated on a false premise. The premise was that we could make a go of it with the current government of South Vietnam. And so in that sense many of us felt that it was basically money down the drain. Not because the programs were always badly designed, but because the whole enterprise was going to fail.

Q: Were the congressmen coming in, were you getting much from the Congress?

SILINS: Yes, there were quite a few visits. Two Congressional staffers in particular were active at the time. Moose and Lowenstein, staffers for the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, were the dynamic duo, if I remember correctly. They took a dim view of our Southeast Asia policy and came through a number of times, looking for evidence that our policy was not working. I remember playing tennis with them. Congress was restive and trying to find out what was going on, but I don't recall that they had a big impact on policy out in the field. Of course, they did back in Washington.

Q: Did you have any feeling that the embassy felt beleaguered, not by troops, but I mean defending a policy, and it was a policy that was beginning to have problems defending itself?

SILINS: Oh yes. I mean, that's how I saw it even before I got there. It clearly was a beleaguered operation. Of course the embassy had also been physically attacked, assaulted in a very dramatic way, during Tet of '68. But yes, also in the political sense many, perhaps most of us felt that we were defending a .... I thought it was a doomed project and that's in fact why I left. When my assignment formally expired for the second time, Ambassador Bunker asked me to stay on. Obviously, he didn't want to have to break in yet another aide. He himself had been there since early 1967 and I know he looked dimly on short tours. But I had been there for two-and-a-half years, had already extended my tour once, I thought the peace agreement was not going to solve the problem, especially since it left the North Vietnamese forces in place, and I really didn't want to be there when it all collapsed.

Q: So the '73 peace agreements came in and you left.

SILINS: That's right. I left even though officers who had served in Vietnam were being recruited to come back to "monitor the peace." I don't regret that decision.

Q: How does your Vietnam experience look to you now?

SILINS: Vietnam is still the assignment I recall most vividly, I guess because I was young, green and exposed to such a range of powerful impressions. What I learned from it is harder to sum up. Part of the trouble is that I had so little direct experience of the grim and bloody side of the war, so what dominates is my memory of that heightened sense of awareness you get in a war zone, a feeling of being more alert and alive. But intellectually I learned to be very wary of the notion that war is just an extension of foreign policy by other means. It's not. It's a miserable business that should be avoided if at all possible. Almost always it does more harm than good.

Q: Where'd you go next?

SILINS: I went to Romania because I was persuaded it would be an interesting place to work by Harry Barnes.

Q: Had just been ambassador there, or became....

SILINS: He had been DCM (Deputy Chief of Mission) there. Harry Barnes was now in personnel and in that capacity he was coming through Vietnam to talk to FSOs and make sure that they were going to be okay career-wise. I had wanted to go to Western Europe. He persuaded me that Eastern Europe was where it was happening. And so I put in a bid for a job in Bucharest, and after studying Romanian went off, well, after a brief bout of hepatitis, went off as an economic-commercial officer in Bucharest.

Q: You were in Bucharest from when to when?

SILINS: '73 to '75, which was a fascinating time to be in Bucharest.

Q: You'd seen Saigon, could you describe Romania as you saw it when you arrived in Bucharest in '73?

SILINS: Romania was pretty rundown economically but was to me a geographically and architecturally interesting place. Romania is a country of a schizophrenic nature, it has a split personality. One of the ways that manifests itself is that in the summertime Bucharest looks like Paris, but in the winter it looks more like Moscow or someplace communist and rundown. The country is beautiful, it has the Black Sea coast and the Danube Delta, it has mountains, it has very fertile farmland and lots of interesting old architecture.

Q: How was the regime of Ceausescu seen at that point?

SILINS: At that time Ceausescu was the darling of the West because he had managed to tweak Moscow's nose a few times, he had good relations with China and he was the only East European leader who had diplomatic relations with Israel. He was also experimenting with a few economic reforms like joint ventures just to keep us interested. And so most Western countries thought he was the cat's pajamas and they sent very good diplomats there, which was one of the hidden benefits of serving in Bucharest, your foreign colleagues were very bright.

Q: Oh yes.

SILINS: So from that point of view it was quite the place to be. Being, of course, the lowly econ-commercial officer I was not exactly in the thick of things, although the ambassador, who was eventually Harry Barnes...

Q: But who was the ambassador to begin with?

SILINS: Well, Bob Martens. That is, Bob Martens had been chargï¿½ for an extended period, something like six to nine months, and then eventually Harry Barnes, who had earlier been DCM, was named ambassador. He was ambassador for most of my time in Bucharest. Dick Viets arrived soon after Harry as his DCM.

But as I was saying, Harry being a generous man with his junior officers, involved us in as many things as he could. He would take me along frequently, even though I was not a political officer, to meetings to act as notetaker. He even called on me occasionally to interpret because my Romanian was pretty good. Of course, his was even better. And I got involved, in a marginal way, in the negotiation of the trade agreement that we signed with Romania in '75. So I got to see a fair amount and I was really quite excited by all this and wanted to come back to Romania when I left, I thought it was fascinating.

Q: Well, you know, it wasn't until '89 that it all fell apart, but Ceausescu's regime really became nasty. Was this early on, and was it seen as being, well, as difficult for people to live there as it was later on?

SILINS: It was always recognized that Ceausescu if given his druthers would internally be a little Stalin, a little tyrant, and he was. He had a restrictive internal regime, although to foreign diplomats it seemed in some respects, compared to countries like the USSR, to be not that bad. For example, the travel regime in Romania was much more flexible than in the Soviet Union, it was much easier to get around and even to visit factories and places like that in Romania. So that gave it the appearance of being relatively liberal. Whereas of course it wasn't at all liberal with the restrictions it imposed on its own citizens, who were compelled to report on contacts with foreigners and all the rest of it. At the time what we did as a mission was to say, well, that's unfortunate and, you know, it's something we really ought to try to do something about ... or maybe Ceausescu really ought to do something about it. But more important to us was Romania's foreign policy, because we were still playing basically balance of power politics, and Ceausescu was a pawn to be used in the bigger game, which involved the Soviet Union and China and the other Central European countries.

I subsequently came to believe, and this is based on a lot of thought because I was also eventually desk officer for Romania for two years in Washington, that we had made a misjudgment. We had not given enough importance to the man's internal policies and we had exaggerated the importance of his foreign policies. And we'd made even more basic misjudgments. For example, we thought that if we encouraged Ceausescu in his foreign-policy independence from the Soviet Union, that would encourage other East European leaders to follow the same path. What we didn't realize was that Ceausescu was universally loathed, despised, held in contempt by virtually all of his peers, in part because of the dictatorial way that he ran his country, which went beyond what the others did. I mean, most of those countries were internally pretty tough but what they saw in Ceausescu was a man who was really Stalin-like in that he enjoyed it, you know, he really did it out of spite and got kind of a sadistic pleasure out of hurting his people. That is what inspired their contempt, and therefore there's no way he could have been a model. And so the excessive attention we lavished on Ceausescu hurt us with other countries. They thought, well, how good is our judgment if we can't see what the guy is really all about?

Q: Well, this was really a product of Kissinger and Nixon, wasn't it? I mean, the grand game appealed to both of them as being...

SILINS: Yes, right, yes. Kissinger and Nixon were both very Realpolitik kind of guys. But eventually even Kissinger, if you read his book Diplomacy, which is, by the way, a very good book... he concluded that for the United States, straight real Realpolitik, no chaser, is not a possible policy, it'll never be accepted by the American people. The American people insist that there be some human rights or moral element, some more idealistic input, into their foreign policy. I think that's absolutely right and I also feel the same way myself. I guess the difference is that Kissinger views the intrusion of this moral element with regret while I believe it is a good thing. But in any case that wasn't our policy at that time.

Q: Was there at the time any division within the embassy as far as Realpolitik? Did people, say, from the consular section or elsewhere complain ...but you know these guys, you've got this, what are they called, the security...?

SILINS: The "Securitate."

Q: The Securitate is really beating up on people and I mean, it's really nasty. Were you getting this?

SILINS: No. There were no divisions in the embassy because everybody saw the same things, agreed it was happening, but had decided it wasn't our main issue. It's not that Harry Barnes said, you know, let's ignore human rights and just focus on Realpolitik. We had some contacts with dissidents and so forth. But first of all, this was before the real human rights crusade hit U.S. foreign policy. We had some interest in it, in fact, but it was limited more to emigration issues than anything else. That was the real focus of U.S. human rights policy in Romania. It became an intense focus at the end of my tour when, during a visit by President Ford in August 1975, we signed a trade agreement with Romania. It incorporated the Jackson-Vanik Amendment, which linked most favored nation trade status to freedom of emigration. Romania I believe was the first country to sign a trade agreement with us with that condition. And so they fell subject to an intensive scrutiny of their emigration policy and that took some of the heat off other human rights issues for a while.

Q: Was this a time when Romania was acting as a conduit for Jews coming out not just from Romania but also the Soviet Union?

SILINS: I'm not sure if they served as a conduit. They did allow Jews to leave Romania, but they allowed them to leave for a price. In other words, Israel was buying them out, something which I didn't know at the time but which I learned subsequently. Romania was really fiendishly clever in the way that it reacted to the Jackson-Vanik Amendment. As I recall, at least in the beginning they pretended to ignore that the real thrust behind Jackson-Vanik was an interest in Jewish emigration, and they caused Jewish emigration actually to decline after the signing of the agreement, as if to show that, you know, they're not going to be coerced by us to up the rate. However, non-Jewish emigration was allowed to go up so as to keep Romania in compliance with the letter of the amendment. But of course that wasn't the point, so it was kind of a practical joke they were playing on us.

Q: As an economic-commercial officer, what were you doing?

SILINS: I was doing a lot of traveling around and reporting. I was going to as many factories as I could and reporting on general economic conditions, analyzing their stupid five year plans. But also a lot of business facilitation because we had big U.S. companies doing business with Romania. By big I mean Boeing, for example, and McDonnell Douglas. Boeing was successfully selling aircraft, McDonnell Douglas was trying to. A big bank had set up a branch there, Manufacturers Hanover Trust. We had a computer manufacturer, Control Data Corporation, that was going into a joint venture. Plus a lot of smaller operations, and so I was pretty busy with American businessmen, most of whom had a very hard time in their negotiations with the Romanians. Romanians were fiendish negotiators, would often put two competitors side-by-side and go from one to the other, back and forth, squeezing each one for the last penny that they could on a contract. And since often the Romanian partner didn't perform on their side of contracts, I had trade complaints to attend to.

Q: What was morale like at the post?

SILINS: Good. Excellent. It was fine because, as I say, at that time Romania was considered to be very special and we had impressive colleagues from other embassies to work with. Our living conditions were exceptionally good. There was even a club, a diplomatic club there.

Q: The famous nine-hole golf course?

SILINS: That's the one. And with a swimming pool, tennis courts. It was just unbeatable for a Warsaw Pact post. It promoted an active, almost sybaritic social life among the foreign community, which in turn fed the illusion that all was well in Romania. The sordid reality underneath became clear to me only much, much later. One source was a book published in 1987 by a defector, Ion Pacepa, who had been a top Romanian intelligence official. It's called Red Horizons and is unbelievably sordid but, sad to say, presumably accurate. I didn't have the stomach to finish it. The book is in a class by itself. Pacepa's report that Romania's so-called maverick foreign policy was actually a complex scam that Ceausescu hatched in 1972 is actually one of his less troubling revelations, at least on the nastiness scale.

Q: What was the feeling about the Soviet menace, threat or whatever it was during that time?

SILINS: Well, I got a pretty good view of that because, as I mentioned, Harry Barnes was a generous ambassador. He actually agreed - in fact it may even have been his idea, I don't remember ... I was in any case allowed to go on a boondoggle, a trip to, let's see, to Budapest, Warsaw, and Moscow, an orientation trip, to allow me to see what the Soviet threat was like and what shape the communist menace took in those locations. So I saw it up close and personal, and not just from Romania. I had talks in those embassies with my colleagues, who wondered what the hell I was doing while they had to work, why was I able to travel like this? And also with local officials and others. To this day I don't quite understand why I was permitted to do it. But it was educational, it really was, and that knowledge did come in handy because I served in the Soviet Union and the Soviet Desk subsequently, and so I think it did some good.

The Soviet menace was certainly a principal preoccupation. That was one of the ways in which we excused Ceausescu's conduct, that is, his internal restrictions, because he had thumbed his nose at Moscow when they invaded Czechoslovakia. He refused to take part in that and so the argument was, well, you know, he has to be this tight internally because of course we know that the USSR is working within Romania to try to unseat him, so in part it excuses what he's doing. Everything during this period was seen through the prism of the Cold War confrontation, the East-West confrontation.

Q: Was there concern at that time that the Soviets might try to move into Romania?

SILINS: I don't recall any imminent threat of that type because, you remember, '75 was actually a climax of dï¿½tente. I left Romania just days after a visit by President Ford, who came to Bucharest from Helsinki where he had signed the Helsinki Final Act, along with all the other European leaders. And so it was really a time of relatively good East-West feeling.

In a way I benefited from that myself. At the end of my assignment in Romania, I wanted to go back to Latvia for my first visit since I left as a two-year-old. To get there, I had to fly through Leningrad. I tried making arrangements through Intourist in Bucharest. But this was not a normal sort of trip that the Intourist office there was set up to handle, and so I wound up dealing with, surprise, a KGB officer at the Soviet embassy. I had a visa and got hotel reservations and plane tickets. It looked like all was well. Then at the last minute, I think the day before my departure, my KGB contact called to say, very sorry; nothing personal, just learned there is no hotel room available for you in Riga. "Intourist in Moscow requests that you not go at this time," he told me. I found that very bizarre. I thought it over, must have talked it over with Harry or Dick Viets, and decided to go anyway. I thought, what the hell, I've got the visa, tickets and proof of reservations, I'll just show up at the airport and see what happens. And all went well. Maybe that was because my flight landed in Leningrad almost simultaneously with the biggest U.S. congressional delegation ever to visit the Soviet Union, headed by Speaker of the House Carl Albert. It was another celebration of the Spirit of Helsinki. I guess the Soviets decided this was not the time to spoil the mood by refusing to let me go to my birthplace ... although they did give it another college try. When I went in to my hotel in Leningrad, where I had to overnight, I tried to confirm my hotel reservation for Riga with Intourist. They stuck to the party line: sorry, no hotel room available just now. And so again I just went to the airport the next morning, got onto a flight to Riga and everything went fine after that.

Q: What did you find going back to Riga?

SILINS: It was a troubling and kind of a sad experience. For one thing it's of course classic that any place you go back to seems smaller than you expected.

Q: Oh yes.

SILINS: The airport seemed tiny... well, it was tiny then - and the city seemed smaller than I expected. It was pretty sad and run down. But in some ways it was, you know, holding together, I mean, materially. Having been an economic officer I was used to looking for signs of material wellbeing, and so I went to the market in Riga. Riga has a famous market, it's five former zeppelin hangars which at that time, this is now August 1975, were absolutely packed with food of all kinds, fresh produce, meat, fish, cheese and all kinds of things. A better selection by far than I had seen in Bucharest. And so from that point of view it seemed to be doing relatively okay. But signs of tension were inescapable. The atmosphere of the place, the hesitation of people to speak Latvian, the hesitation to meet with foreigners, it was under a much more brutal pressure than Bucharest had been. So you know, it was kind of a traumatic experience for me, really.

Q: Did you find any family there?

SILINS: Yes, in fact the main reason I went to Riga was to see my grandmother, my mother's mother, before she died. And I saw her, she was in her 80s and was still in pretty good shape, actually. And also saw my mother's sister, who was also in relatively good shape. They shared a classic Soviet style apartment on the outskirts of Riga. It was clear that the place was a police state run by terror and everyone was very afraid of the consequences of talking openly to anyone from the West, particularly an American diplomat. And it was also quite overrun by Russians. Again, this was August. I did go to the seaside. My movements were restricted, there were not many places I could go but I did go to a stretch of the Baltic coast, Jurmala it's called, which means seaside. And found that it was very popular with Russian tourists, just absolutely packed like Coney Island. I guess because of pollution some very smelly seaweed had washed up all along the beach, which gave it a kind of unpleasant aftertaste.

Q: Well you know, going back to Romania, I heard that at some point Ceausescu was sort of selling off, this was a very fertile country, was selling off produce to get money and so there were real shortages within Romania. At your point of time, was this happening or was Romania basically a prosperous agricultural country?

SILINS: No, it wasn't. It could have been a very prosperous, had been a prosperous agricultural country, but because of the stupidity, really the insanity of Ceausescu's economic policies, it was running its agriculture into the ground by improper management and also by excessive export, as you suggest, in order to gain hard currency. More remarkable, it was even turning a major resource, their oil, into a liability. Because what this man was doing right before our eyes was excessively developing Romania's refining capacity to the point where it exceeded the country's production capacity. This meant that in order to keep its refineries busy, Romania had to become a net importer of oil, like everybody else, and was therefore also negatively affected by the surge in oil prices, which was absolutely crazy. It meant that what had been a major asset for them was now a liability.

Q: Was there any influence from Yugoslavia, which had a different form of economic development?

SILINS: There was some cooperation with Yugoslavia. As I recall there were two types of economic cooperation. One was the Iron Gates Project, which is a dam on the Danube. And they also had an ill-fated and I think eventually totally unsuccessful joint project to build an aircraft. I don't know of any way in which the Yugoslav worker-management model got reflected in Romania. Romania was deeply committed to central management and had no use for what the Yugoslavs were doing.

Q: Well then, you left Romania in '75?

SILINS: Yes, August '75, by way of that trip to Latvia.

Q: Whither?

SILINS: Back to Washington to the State Department's executive secretariat. Interesting place to be at that time. I was a line officer. You know what they do, quality control of documents going to the principal officers on the seventh floor. But the most interesting part was travel by the Secretary of State, who was Henry Kissinger at that time. And so I did a number of trips with Kissinger and also one presidential trip, President Ford's visit to the Philippines, which was quite a clambake, I can tell you. But it was fascinating because we did have some opportunities to get up close to the secretary and see how he operated, which gave me some sobering insights into his leadership style.

Q: Let's see. You were with the executive secretariat from '75 to...?

SILINS: For just one year.

Q: '76.

SILINS: '75-'76. Then I was offered a job, which I probably should have taken, as aide to the deputy secretary of state - I guess that would have been Chuck Robinson. For reasons best known to myself I decided, okay, enough staff work, it's time to really see how the department works up close, I want to be a desk officer. That may have been a mistake. And because I still was intrigued with Romania, I got the job of desk officer for Romania. That compounded the mistake.

Q: Let's go back to the time you were in the executive secretariat. Can you talk about your impression and impact of the Kissinger style and all while you were in the building and also on the trip?

SILINS: Yes, I think I could summarize it. His impact on the department was negative personally but positive professionally. That is, people who worked close to him tended to wind up being sometimes hurt by him because he was not terribly kindly toward his staff. I have an anecdote, if you want, to illustrate that.

Q: Sure.

SILINS: But at the same time morale was good because everybody knew that this man was making U.S. foreign policy and the Department was very important in that process, and that's always a good feeling. So it was a bit contradictory. It was a love-hate kind of relationship, and I still feel that way about him. I have tremendous respect for Kissinger as a politician, as a thinker. As a writer I think he's brilliant. But as a human being he left something to be desired.

The anecdote that sticks in my mind has to do with Al Adams. I knew Al Adams from Vietnam. He got a job at the time I was in the secretariat as the number one aide to Kissinger; that is, the junior number one aide, the one who sat outside his office and came in with his papers and kept track of his appointments and so forth. In other words, saw him 50 times a day. After Al had been working for him for about three months, they went up to New York to attend the fall opening of the UN General Assembly and stayed as usual at the Waldorf-Astoria. They spent about a week up there and then, after the secretary's participation was over, packed up and made their way down to the limousine with Al right behind the secretary carrying his briefcase. When they got to the limousine, Kissinger turned around, looked at Al slightly vaguely and said, sticking out his hand, "Thank you very much, you run a great hotel."

And I also saw Kissinger on the plane sort of kicking people out of the way who were working on the floor, the only available space, putting together briefing books for the next stop. He had a very big ego but he left his mark on U.S. foreign policy.

Q: What was your impression of the Ford trip to the Philippines?

SILINS: A big circus. I don't have any great insights into it because the Philippines is not my turf and my responsibility there focused only on a narrow aspect - is the schedule going to work for the secretary of state? I can't tell you what it meant in foreign policy terms, but it was an impressive show. I did go out to meet the plane when the president and the whole party arrived and I drove back in with them in the motorcade. The Filipinos had lined every foot of road all the way from the airport to the Malacaï¿½ang Palace with dancers and singers and people waving; there was not an empty space along that entire route, to show how well that population was organized.

Q: Did you get any feel for when you were in the executive secretariat about the role of the White House and the secretary of state, the relationship between them?

SILINS: I began to get a feel for that. I'm not sure I can tell you now what I thought then because I've thought about it a lot since that time, including most recently when I was doing some teaching at the University of Chicago. I thought at the time, and I still believe mostly, that there is an undefined aspect to this relationship, there's always bound to be tension, and it usually is resolved in favor of the NSC, which is closer to the White House, and not the State Department. Physical proximity is a powerful trump card. Not the only one, of course. When I was working in the secretariat during the Kissinger era, there was less of a problem than usual, but that's because foreign policy was Henry Kissinger and Henry Kissinger was foreign policy. The two were identical so there really was not much of an opening for the NSC to get in the way. Usually that's not the case, you don't usually have as strong a secretary of state and there usually is a problem. I think there was a problem, for example, with Warren Christopher, not because he was facing a particularly dynamic national security advisor but because he himself wasn't sufficiently dynamic. Maybe this is something we can talk about at greater length later. At the time there wasn't a problem because Kissinger was...

Q: He was doing it all, you had such an interim president, too. Well, you went to the Romanian desk, you were there from '76 until ...?

SILINS: Let's see. It would have been '76-'78.

Q: This is your first sort of non-staff job in the State Department. How did you find being a desk officer?

SILINS: I found it not what I had expected, in part because of very specific things happening with respect to Romania at that time. The emigration issue had begun to snowball and was generating endless amounts of congressional correspondence and dozens of daily phone calls that I was expected to deal with. I'm just not very good at that sort of thing, just ginning out, you know, dozens of pro forma responses. Some days I got close to a hundred phone calls about individual cases. I got backed up on that.

More seriously, what happened is that I was becoming more disillusioned about U.S. policy toward Romania. I had begun to move toward the conviction I now hold that we grossly exaggerated the importance of Ceausescu's foreign policy credentials and had not given enough importance to his really restrictive internal policies. That was becoming more clear to me, and I thought that we were now really overdoing things. During my period on the desk Ceausescu was invited to visit the U.S. Ceausescu was a horrible visitor. He's very demanding. His people, you know, spent lots of money and they were a giant pain in the ass. This is well documented by every place that he's ever been.

Q: I'm told that Buckingham Palace, they had to go around and try to protect the silver.

SILINS: Well, in any case his people were terrible. But it was not just the demands that they made in a material sense. For example, we ginned up for his wife Elena, who is if anything an even worse human being than her husband ... she had floated a request to be made an honorary member of the Academy of Sciences because she allegedly had a degree in chemistry, which I think was shown not actually to exist. But we, as did a number of other countries to their eternal shame, I must say, actually tendered this honor to her. And it was things like this that began to get on my nerves, being part of that kind of sleazy operation, because it was now not only very clear that Ceausescu was excessive in his internal restrictions, but it was also becoming plausible that the man was actually clinically insane. And yet here we were inviting him to the White House, offering these academic honors to his wife and treating him like royalty. And it stuck in my craw, I must say.

Q: What about the emigration side? What type of emigration was this?

SILINS: Well, the main interest from the U.S. side was in Jewish emigration. There was a sizeable not very happy Jewish community in Romania and many of these people really wanted out of there. There was also some other emigration, other people interested in leaving, but U.S. interest in that wasn't as intense. Mostly it was Jewish emigration that generated lots and lots of lists of people, letters to the Congress, letters from the Congress to the State Department, and communication with the Romanian government. In short a lot of busy work, but with a net payoff, that is, a steady stream of people being allowed to leave, which is a good thing. I don't begrudge the amount of time I put into that. I do think, though, that the focus on emigration as a human rights issue skewed our vision of what really needed to be done in Romania. They needed a lot more than just a freer emigration policy, they needed a whole new approach to running the country.

Q: Well, do you think there was any prospect if we'd played our cards differently to changing anything in Romania?

SILINS: A fair question. It's hard to say. You could argue that because, as I believe, Ceausescu was not really all there mentally, that perhaps he would not have responded rationally even to severe pressure. I'm not sure that's true, though. The fact is, we didn't really try it, and so I feel we didn't explore all the options. And it's not just that we didn't explore the options but that the policy we pursued was wrong even if it had turned out to be true that we couldn't make him more liberal. Because we, as I said, were trying to hold him up as an example to other East Europeans, and that was wrong. I mean, it was bound to fail because he was not a useable example.

Q: Were there any other issues in '76-'78 that came up with Romania?

SILINS: The main argument was about how much we should do for Romania in terms of trade access and, specifically, access to U.S. high technology that might have military applications. That was a running debate. What category should we put the country in? Should we give them special privileges because they had this sort of independent foreign policy? My view by the end of all this was that we were really hoist on our own petard here, we had just put too much enthusiasm into the project. And here, although I have tremendous respect for Harry Barnes, I hold him somewhat to blame for this because he took that hobbyhorse and rode it for all it was worth, of Ceausescu as a special case. I think this was the time for what I consider more traditional diplomacy, a much more relaxed, hands-off, more analytical approach. Let's see what's really in the U.S. interest here instead of getting carried away. So I had a difference of view with the mission on how much we should be doing for Ceausescu, certainly toward the end of my tenure on the desk.

Q: Was there a Romanian ï¿½migrï¿½ group that was powerful? Because, you know, particularly in dealing with Central Europe and the Balkans and all, you've got people who've settled in the United States who get very excited about relations with that country and can often display that interest through a couple of congressmen from Gary, Indiana, or something like that. Did you have much of that, did you feel that?

SILINS: There was some of that but they weren't successful in changing the thrust of U.S. policy, at least not at that time. Eventually, yes. Our policy on human rights changed across the board and we became much more intrusive, shall I say, on issues like a country's treatment of its own citizens. But at that time, although there were lots of people in the U.S. of Romanian origin who said this man is a madman, what are you doing even talking to him, and they demonstrated when he visited the U.S., it didn't change our policy.

Q: While you were there, '76 to '78, you had the Carter administration came in halfway through it.

SILINS: That's right.

Q: Did this make any difference? I mean, did you feel it on the desk?

SILINS: Well, it made some difference. I wasn't all that impressed with the Carter administration's first steps on human rights policy. I guess I was one of those who thought that you needed to know more than they did before you could presume to lecture countries about how they should be conducting their domestic affairs. I thought that their approach was too simple-minded. I sat in on lectures given to senior Romanian officials by our first assistant secretary for human rights and I could see that they were not having any impact, because the recipients of the lectures didn't believe that the person giving them knew what the country was all about. You know, hadn't been there and so was not in a position to make a judgment. So in that sense it was still too early, the policy had not yet been internalized by the whole department, it was being conducted by people who didn't have the area knowledge, the expertise that was needed in order to be convincing. Their heart was in the right place but they didn't yet have the ability, the weight, the gravitas with their audience to make an impact.

Q: You left in '78, the Carter administration is beginning to get its feet wet, I mean, beginning to take control. Did you see it moving in a more realistic direction?

SILINS: Well, you remember how the Carter administration ended, and it's hard to say that.... I thought they were projecting an image of weakness globally, and indeed I think that's going to be history's verdict on them, too. That's why, even though it may have sounded as though they were doing exactly what I would have wanted them to do with respect to human rights, it was the way they were doing it that wasn't impressive to me. And some of the people they brought into foreign affairs didn't have the right credentials as far as I was concerned. So, as I say, heart was in the right place but not really able to deliver the goods, in my estimation.

Q: You left the Romanian desk in '78 for where?

SILINS: Then we went to Haiti. A change of pace, in part I think it was because my career position was not exactly enhanced by the fact that I was probably perceived as dragging my feet on the desk, as I suggested to you. I thought we were, if anything, doing too much with Romania. That's an unfortunate position for a desk officer to be in. A desk officer has to be the senior cheerleader for the policy and I wasn't, didn't feel I could be. Another possible job fell through, a Europe job at the NSC. When that didn't work out, I went to Haiti as the best of the other choices. And I don't regret that, although it's really off my beat.

Q: You were in Haiti from when to when?

SILINS: '78 to '80.

Q: By the way, did you get married somewhere along the way here?

SILINS: Yes, I married an American woman I'd met in Romania, Elizabeth Johnston. We married in 1976, a year after coming back from Romania. At that time I was staying in an apartment very near the Washington Cathedral, so we arranged to be married in the Cathedral's St. John's Chapel, that was the closest church. Ellsworth Bunker and Carol Laise were living just two blocks away at the time, so we invited them, too. Elizabeth and I had a son, Nicholas, the next year. She had been married previously and had three kids from that marriage - Kate, Matthew and Lucas - so I had an instant family.

Q: Oh yes. Well you were in Haiti in '78. What was your job there?

SILINS: In Haiti I was the chief of the political section, the political officer.

Q: And what was the situation in Haiti when you were there?

SILINS: As always, terrible. But not as terrible as it got later. Haiti was still very livable for those who could afford it. We were in the early Baby Doc period. We hadn't quite scoped him out yet, we didn't know whether he had promise or not. The initial readings, of course were, as you recall, negative on Baby Doc. He was called Basket Head because he looked dumb. But during my time there he married Michele Bennett, who seemed to be a very savvy woman from a good family. We thought, okay, maybe this is going to do the trick, maybe she is going to give him some smarts and point him in the right direction. Didn't turn out to be the case, but that wasn't apparent by the time I had left. At the time it was still a pretty tough place, of course very poor, poorest in the Western Hemisphere. We were trying to, now we are into the post-Carter period, we're into...

Q: But no, we're still, '78 to '80.

SILINS: By post-Carter I mean Carter has arrived, in the sense that we have a more active human rights policy. So one of my jobs was to go around and talk to freethinking people, opposition people, people that didn't think that the country should have a president with lifetime tenure. So that was an interesting part of the job, including one very dramatic example.

Q: What was that?

SILINS: Well, this was an attack by the Tontons Macoutes, Haiti's paramilitary thugs who acted as enforcers for the Duvalier regime, on a human rights meeting I had gone to. This was in '79, I guess. The meeting was held in a church auditorium by the Haitian Human Rights League. The group's president, Gerard Gourgue, was giving a talk and he had filled the hall, so you could see there was some real support for these ideas in Haiti despite the oppressive regime. I had arrived a bit late and so I was standing outside by a side door looking into the packed auditorium and listening to the speaker. Just minutes after I arrived the trouble started. A bunch of muscular thugs began to chant DUVALIER! DUVALIER! in deep guttural voices, both inside and outside the auditorium. Then all hell broke loose. Inside, the thugs started smashing the furniture, breaking the legs off the chairs and hitting members of the audience with them. People began streaming out, and as they ran out they were beaten by tontons who were waiting for them outside the door, not far from where I was standing. I stood there appalled, taking it all in as the hall emptied. Then a young woman ran up to me, Gourgue's daughter, and appealed to me for help because her father was being beaten up and her mother as well who was with them. I went back inside with her and saw them.

By that time the church was almost empty, most of the chairs had been broken up, but there were still three or four of the thugs left. They were leaning menacingly over Gourgue, who was down on one knee on the floor, his hands up trying to protect his head, which was bleeding, these guys were pounding on him, his wife was next to him. I don't know exactly what I thought I was doing but I walked up to Gourgue, pulled him up and began to lead him out of the hall, his wife and daughter following. And at first the tontons let me get away with it, as though I was wrapped in a bubble of diplomatic immunity. And so I got the Gourgues out of the church. But as I led them toward the exit gate, one of the tontons gave me a tremendous whack with the flat of his hand on my left ear. I was stunned, disoriented, almost fell. The blow ruptured my eardrum. I was separated from Gourgue but I learned later that he got to safety; he was taken by a priest into the basement and hidden there. And the tontons didn't attack me any more, so I made my way out to my car, drove home, and reported the incident to our ambassador. Quite a demonstration of the regime's attitude toward human rights at that point in Haiti.

Q: Who was our ambassador while you were there?

SILINS: William Jones.

Q: And how did he operate during this difficult situation?

SILINS: Well, he immediately contacted the government to protest. Jones tried to keep steady pressure on the government to ease up, but Haiti was a problem for which we had no solution. There was no schism within the embassy as to what to do because none of us knew what the hell to do about the root problem. Haiti is a very difficult place to help. One problem was we could find no solid foundation on which to build. To put it another way, it was obvious there was not much holding the country together, preserving a thin veneer of order. Chaos had swept Haiti in the past, and we didn't see any advantage to Haiti or to the United States of unwittingly precipitating it again through some maladroit experiment. And so while we could have pressured Duvalier more to loosen up than we did, the fact is that we thought we had no real options as to which way to drive him because the place simply wasn't built that way, it wasn't built to support any real programs. When I got there we had spent millions and millions of dollars on assistance programs but had little to show for it. We had reverted to training Haitians rather than doing turnkey projects. AID previously had built things and said okay, here you are, now you run it, and they'd always fail. And so we decided, no more of that. Now what we're going to do is train the Haitians how to help themselves, get them invested in the projects. So consequently we were doing mostly training programs. Whenever we had congressional visitors we had to take them to an Israeli agricultural project because it was the only concrete thing you could show to somebody. So it was a very, very difficult place in that respect. We just didn't know which end to grab it by. And we still don't.

Q: Well, as the political officer, was there the equivalent of a political party, a ruling one, or was it all running out, or was it equivalent to the White House?

SILINS: It was a family-run show, the Duvalier operation. Baby Doc had the title of President for Life and the clique of people that had supported his father, Papa Doc, was now supporting him. There was no political party structure. There was, however, an influential group with some impressive individuals, usually called The Elite. These were mostly prosperous rather light-skinned blacks. Haitians, by the way, are sensitive to gradations of color, much more than Americans are. They're appalled that here everybody's called black whether he has ï¿½ or 1/64th proportion of African heritage. They make more subtle distinctions. And some Haitians looked down on American blacks because they didn't defeat slavery on their own, whereas Haitians take great pride in having defeated Napoleon. That was a bit of a problem for Ambassador Jones, as an African-American.

Anyway, many of the elite were successful in business. Now, Haiti has no natural resources to speak of. There was a bauxite mine but it was winding down because the ore wasn't of very high quality. That was about it in terms of natural resources. So the business focus was on tourism, assembly operations or low-level manufacturing. Haiti at that time made most of our baseballs and softballs, for example, and some textiles. Just enough to keep a group of people in pretty good comfort. There was very little trickle-down. Most Haitians were desperately poor. And the elite wasn't interested in government; they avoided it like poison because they knew it could be fatal to mess with politics. So there wasn't a middle class in the sense that we conceive of it, a middle class active in social affairs and community affairs and government affairs. There was no sense of civic action. There was a token parliament and that was about it.

Q: As the political officer what did you do?

SILINS: Traveled around the country, talked to people inside and outside the government. From the elite I picked up some metaphors about life and politics in Haiti. The crab theory of politics explains why it's so hard to rise to a better position in Haiti. Why do crabs find it difficult to escape from a basket? Because the other crabs keep him in there. Then there's the bullwhip theory of politics. It's easy to make people respect you, just keep a bullwhip on the wall behind your desk. They'll know what it's for. It's a country vivid and close to the ground for a political officer. It was educational for me because with the sole exception of Vietnam all of my assignments have been in Europe or close to it.

As political officer I had no mandate to involve myself in economic development issues, but I visited aid projects, ours and those of other countries, anyway. I also talked to the non-governmental and religious groups that were all trying in their own way to help Haiti become a better place. Some of them were doing wonderful work, but no one seemed to have found what many of us at the embassy were looking for, the secret for bringing lasting political, social and economic development to Haiti on a large scale.

Q: Something that became a chronic problem with the United States was illegal immigration, boat people and all that. Was that going on while you were there?

SILINS: It was very much going on and I got pushed into the middle of it. I was subpoenaed to testify at the Federal district court in Miami about the treatment of repatriated boat people. I testified that to the best of our knowledge they were not persecuted once they were returned to Haiti, not any more than anyone else was persecuted in Haiti, and not for having tried to take a boat to the U.S. But you've named one of our major interests in Haiti. One of the reasons we wanted to stimulate the economy was to create jobs so people would not flee to Florida. But we were having an awfully hard time doing it.

Q: Were you under a lot of pressure to show that those who were returned to Haiti weren't picked on?

SILINS: No, I didn't feel pressure because I believed that was the case. Haiti is not like a communist country. The authorities picked on anyone who pissed them off, but they had no special reason to pick on someone who tried to flee the country unless that person owed them money or something like that. Leaving Haiti wasn't against their ideology. In a communist country, if you tried to flee, you were an ideological traitor because you were saying with your feet that this system is not working. The Haitians had no such hang-ups. If things weren't going well here for someone, fine, let them go. They couldn't squeeze anything out of a stone. The boat people were the poorest people, they had nothing to offer to the authorities.

Q: How about the embassy? One of the recurrent themes, and this goes back maybe to the beginning of the 19th century, is that the embassy is often caught up by the elite of a country, socially and all that. Was this at all true?

SILINS: Well yes, I think it's a fair observation. Sure, we saw more of the elite and of the people in government than we saw of the poor Haitians, in part because few of us could speak Creole. The language of the Haitian people, of course, is not French, that's the language of government and of the elite. But most Haitians speak Creole and only Creole. I didn't learn that, so I couldn't deal directly with those that did not have French. So in that respect yes, I plead guilty that I didn't have the ability to deal directly with the average Haitian. We did have people in the embassy, though, that could do that. For example, Cliff Tighe had spent a lot of time in Haiti as a boy because his father was there with the military. He spoke fluent Creole, so he was one of our windows into that community. He was not in the political section, he was a general services officer, but it's a small embassy. So he used to go out and talk to people and see what's on their mind and how things are going.

Q: But then, say on a social level, you basically were dealing with a, you might say, a commercial class, who really were avoiding politics? Is that kind of how it fell out?

SILINS: Well, not only with the people who were avoiding politics. I also dealt a lot with the people in the so-called government. You know, the ministers, the members of parliament. Of course, the people in government had some impact. There were also people that had government positions who were not unenlightened. I remember a judge, for example, that we thought very highly of and had a lot of contact with. He was trying to encourage the spread of the rule of law in Haiti, against considerable odds, I might add. Haitians are individually, as people, very impressive. They're energetic, cheerful and optimistic. Despite the horrible conditions they may live in, parents keep trying to raise their kids so that they have a brighter future. Every morning as I would drive to the embassy, the kids were going to school. Emerging from the most horrible slum you'd see a scrubbed and polished little kid with a briefcase going off to school. So there's a lot of will there, but they lacked the basic social and cultural support network.

Larry Harrison, who was the AID director for part of the time I was in Port au Prince, has written about this at length. He was struck by the dramatic difference between Haiti and the Dominican Republic, which share the island. Over the years he's concluded that it is the culture, the entire system of values and attitudes, that determines whether a society will succeed and whether an aid program can help it. In Haiti, there is a basic flaw in the way in which the people have been socialized that makes it, despite their best intentions and efforts, almost impossible for the country to move forward.

Q: Was there much legal migration to the United States while you were there?

SILINS: Some, not too much. There was a good deal of travel to the U.S. because of course it's so close, but the consular job there is hellish, with long, long visa lines. Of course, the consuls had to be pretty careful about to whom they issued visas, and they felt badly because more people were going illegally anyway than ones they issued visas to. But there was a fair amount of travel back and forth. The elite, of course, traveled all the time and came back because they were living very comfortably in Haiti. Emigration as such I think was limited because there weren't that many Haitians established legally yet in the U.S. There was a large illegal Haitian community, in New York, of course, also in Florida and in Canada, but they weren't yet in a position to file visa petitions for their relatives.

Q: Had drugs become a problem?

SILINS: No, not yet. I think I got out of there just before Haiti got really dangerous, both medically because of AIDS, the AIDS scare came shortly afterwards, violence and drugs. When I was there, safety was a concern only in specific circumstances. For example, security officers told people in the U.S. mission that if they should unfortunately have an auto accident where they hit someone, it was best to keep moving because there is a real danger of being chopped up by irate machete-wielding spectators if you don't. There was a fair amount of theft and burglary. In fact, my house was hit five times, which seemed to me a wretched excess and suggested one of my employees might be involved. There was no violence, although we woke up once at three in the morning with a guy actually in our bedroom going through my wife's purse. But he took off and there was no threat. Shortly after that, though, life there became more dangerous.

Q: You left in 1980, is that right?

SILINS: Yes, I think that's right.

Q: I thought we might stop at this point and pick it up next time, it's a good place to stop.

SILINS: Right.

Q: Today is the 3rd of March 1998. Ints, so in 1980, why Russian language training? I would have thought there would have been a certain ... you'd sort of seen the elephant, or at least your family had. Why did you want to go back?

SILINS: That's a fair question. As I recall, I was recruited for the job in Leningrad. Actually, I think initially it wasn't clear whether the Department wanted me to go to Leningrad or to Moscow, but one of the two. It probably stemmed from my previous service in Romania and I wouldn't be surprised if Harry Barnes had some role in this. And I did feel ambivalent about it, as you correctly suggest. The idea of going back into the mouth of the whale had interest but also was a bit intimidating for me. And I wasn't the only one feeling ambivalent, so was the office of security in the State Department, which in fact initially opposed my being assigned, after I decided yes, I did want to go to Leningrad. They opposed the assignment not only because I was born in Latvia, which of course Moscow considered part of the Soviet Union, but I still had relatives there, including an aunt, my mother's sister. And so the office of Soviet affairs actually had to get the support of the director general, who at that time was Harry Barnes, whom I'd worked for in Romania, to overrule SY and get my assignment approved.

Q: Let's talk a bit about the Russian language training. You'd left [Latvia] too early to have picked up any?

SILINS: Oh right, much too early. I was only two.

Q: Where did you take Russian?

SILINS: Rosslyn, the FSI building. The Russian language program was still, shall we say, under construction. There was no finished text and they were making it up as they went along. That had both strengths and disadvantages. Some of the instructors were very good, very energetic and imaginative in how they presented the subject. But because there was a lack of overriding structure we felt some frustration. There were also the inevitable sort of political tensions among instructors. I think this is common in all those languages, by which I mean East European, Russian. And so that added some color to the experience.

Q: Could you give some examples of that, of the tension, of how it demonstrated itself to the students?

SILINS: Well, perhaps I shouldn't say there was tension so much as simple differences among the instructors. One of them was Ukrainian, of shall we say a rather conservative bent, and others were of different waves of immigrant, including one rather aristocratic white Russian. And so there were strong differences of style, which frankly I think was all to the good.

Q: In the Russian training, did you get any feel for or briefings about what you were going to find in the Soviet Union in those days?

SILINS: Oh sure, yes, because it was not just a language training program but also area studies. And so we had lectures, we did a lot of reading about the whole region, the Soviet Union in particular and of course, in my case, Leningrad specifically. So yes, we were quite adequately prepared for the assignment, very thoroughly prepared.

Q: You took Russian from, I guess, 1980 to '81?

SILINS: That's right. It was, I think, a nine-month course.

Q: And then off to, was it to Leningrad?

SILINS: To Leningrad.

Q: How'd you go to Leningrad?

SILINS: Flew there by the most direct route, as I recall. I don't recall where the stopover was.

Q: I was just wondering whether, sometimes people went to Finland and over and that sort of thing.

SILINS: You know, I really don't recall what the route was. One thing I do recall, though. You remember, this is sort of the height of the Cold War period, this is 1981 and Reagan is in the White House and his views about the Soviet Union are well known.

Q: The Evil Empire.

SILINS: Right. I'm not sure he had already called it that but you could see it in his face. But I remember when I got onto the airplane in New York I picked up a copy of The New York Times and found, much to my dismay, in the second section, the Metro section, a long and vivid account about drug dealing in New York by teenagers. And I thought, oh my god, here I am going to the Soviet Union, a representative of the United States, and I'm bringing in what looks like anti-U.S. propaganda. What am I going to do about this? Well of course I went ahead and brought it in but it just struck me at the time as very ironic.

Q: You were in Leningrad from 1981 until...?

SILINS: Until '83.

Q: Until '83. Who was the consul general there?

SILINS: First Chris Squire, who was very easy to work with, very knowledgeable, a very nice man.

Q: And then?

SILINS: And then Bill Shinn for my second year.

Q: Bill Shinn. What was your impression of Leningrad at that point?

SILINS: Well, the city was imposing architecturally, as you know. It's a city built by Italian architects, but in Soviet guidebooks they were referred to as "the Russian architect Quarenghi," for example, which didn't quite ring true. But what struck me was something that I think has struck other people, too - it seemed like a great imperial city that had been taken over by the servant class, if I dare say this. In other words, the appearance of the people didn't fit the grandeur of their surroundings. So that was my first impression.

But the main thing, of course, is that this was a time of high tension between the U.S. and the Soviet Union.

Q: Can you explain what the situation was in our relations at that point?

SILINS: A time of strong hostility and much tension over espionage. Espionage, in fact, was sort of the master issue that cast its shadow over almost every aspect of our operations and our relationship. Leningrad as a post had its own specific profile. What we were known for, and I think we did very well, was to give a kind of window on the man on the street, a window onto more ordinary life in the Soviet Union as opposed to the kind of analytical stuff that Moscow did. But we also served other functions and they had to do with intelligence gathering of different types, not all of which we can discuss in detail here. One of them, a quite accepted game between the U.S. and the Soviet Union, was military intelligence gathering. Now, we didn't have a resident military attachï¿½ but, Leningrad being a major naval base, U.S. naval attachï¿½s would visit us regularly. And they would go through their little choreography with the KGB where they would go down to the areas where ships were built and take pictures and that kind of stuff. And that all usually worked out in a fairly friendly manner, but there were other things going on that were not so nice and in fact just before I arrived had led to some real unpleasantness.

Now, this is out of the area of intelligence gathering, but what had happened just before I came was that one of our consular officers, Dan Fried, who was not an agent at all, he's not a spy, had been beat up, presumably because he was in active contact with refuseniks, that is, Soviet Jews who were trying to emigrate but had been refused repeatedly. There was other harassment of the consulate going on too, though, which was more focused, shall we say. It turned out subsequently, we didn't know this at the time but I certainly got to know it in detail because I was on the Soviet desk afterwards, that the consulate had been completely penetrated by microphones, so that apparently even what we considered relatively secure areas were bugged and we were probably being monitored in all of our conversations, essentially.

Q: Normally we had these so-called plastic bubbles, these special rooms and all that are supposed to be well protected, but was the feeling that even places such as that were bugged?

SILINS: Well, I'm not positive if that's the case. It may be true that there were still some areas where we could have conversations that were not monitored. The fact is that by the placement of microphones elsewhere in the building the KGB could easily determine essentially who was doing what in the consulate because there was no way you could only discuss that sort of thing in the bubble. It had already become clear from the pattern of harassment they engaged in, little things like letting the air out of tires or close surveillance or other kinds of minor damage, that they probably had a good idea of who was doing what in the consulate.

Q: What was your impression of all this effort on the intelligence side? I've often felt that, you know, this intelligence business can get very counterproductive at a certain point. I mean, you're talking about trying to maintain relations with a country and if you're sort of turning the thugs loose to be out there harassing it really doesn't advance any cause at all.

SILINS: Well, I share your skepticism. My skepticism about the value of certain kinds of intelligence activity grew throughout my career and is quite strong now. There are some things that I think were both useful and necessary given the kind of relationship we had with the Soviet Union, which was intense and competitive. And of course the USSR was a fiercely secretive, closed society. As I mentioned, the sort of open military intelligence gathering, which they also did in the U.S., is something that I think probably was okay. The military always claimed that they learned a lot, that our whole military build-up could be better focused because of our knowledge of what the Soviets were up to. But there are other activities that, it turns out, were not only not productive but sometimes fatal. That is to say, the people that we recruited in the Soviet Union to be agents for us, almost all of them were known to the Soviet government. That was, of course, either fatal to them in terms of being executed or it ended their useful lives in that country and many of them, of course, couldn't get out. I think that was very, very unfortunate. As I mentioned, it is clear that the KGB knew almost everything that we were doing and so they were able to plant false information and they were able to round up all the people they thought were really dangerous to them. So we were not really accomplishing anything, we were just adding to the tension between the two countries by those kinds of activities. So I agree with you, I think that often they were not productive. I believe that even today the resources that we dedicate to espionage are way out of proportion to the resources that we dedicate to classical diplomacy, and I think that balance needs to be redressed.

Q: What was your particular position in the consulate general?

SILINS: I was the number two, the deputy principal officer. I was responsible, as a DCM would be, for managing the mission for the consul general, as well as for overseeing economic and political reporting. On the reporting side, as I said, what we did was to try to throw a light on ordinary life and so we had as many contacts as we could with people outside the official realm and we also went to lectures, public lectures, of any kind that we could get into. The most well attended series was by the Znanie Society, the Knowledge Society. They covered all kinds of topics, one that I remember particularly was one in which I was the first to hear an announcement of the grain harvest figures for the previous couple of years. The Soviet Union was doing very badly in agriculture and so they had stopped publishing the statistics. The numbers were of great interest to us because we were also trying to sell grain, and of course the Soviets had a big place in our market as consumers but also they tended to export some. So that was a number of some significance that I was able to get in that way. But mostly it was more routine things that we obtained, little snippets about...

Q: In speaking to others who served in the Soviet Union at that time, who also found the Znanie Society was a great benefit, they often were saying one of the most interesting things was the reaction of the people to it. In other words, it was not just some apparatchik lecturing, I mean, there was a real give and take from the people, you got much more of a feeling of what subjects moved the Soviet people. Did you find that?

SILINS: At the time that I was covering the lectures, people were more careful about showing their opinion than they were later. I should have mentioned at the beginning that I took up this job a time when the Solidarity movement in Poland had become active and strong, to an extent that scared Moscow. They were afraid that this virus was going to spread, and of course Leningrad and the Baltic States in particular were very close to Poland and subject to that infection. So they clamped down particularly hard on the Leningrad area, already known as a place where the KGB tried out its tricks. Because it was close to the West, it was where the KGB refined its techniques in political control and counterespionage. So it was a pretty tough area, and ordinary Russians there had learned how to mask their reactions and were not sticking their necks out.

Q: What about the artistic life and the intelligentsia? Were you able to have any meaningful contacts with that group?

SILINS: We had a lot of contacts with that group. We had contacts with them in their homes and apartments, we invited them to the consulate and even sometimes to the consulate's dacha. We had a regular film series in the consul general's residence and people like that would come. They ironically called themselves "the KGB's entertainment committee for the diplomatic corps." They were signaling to us, "Look, there are rules governing this, we have to report our conversations to the KGB, they let us see you because it keeps you from talking to more dangerous people." And so that was part of the big game, too. Nevertheless we were, simply by going around and going to the buildings where they lived, able to have some idea what life was really like in the Soviet Union. In my case I had I think exceptional opportunities to see what real life was like, because our consulate general in Leningrad was also responsible for reporting on the Baltic capitals, that indeed was the reason why I finally decided to ask for the assignment. And I started going regularly to Tallinn, Vilnius and Riga. In Riga, as I mentioned, I had relatives and friends of the family and so I was able to see what ordinary life was like. But I have to say right up front here that I was probably not a terribly productive reporter because I always felt very conscious, not just with respect to my relatives but with everyone, that they would have to deal with the KGB after our meetings. So I was not aggressive in trying to get them to, you know, tell me how bad the government is, to make statements that could land them in hot water. I relied more on observation than interrogation.

Q: I would expect that you would have been subjected to considerable harassment by the KGB every time you went to the Baltic States.

SILINS: Only once was the surveillance unusually aggressive. First of all, the KGB routine was pretty much the following. When you first arrived in Leningrad you'd be pretty closely followed for about a month or so while they got down your basic pattern. After that, unless you were working in intelligence, they really didn't bother you very much, and I found that to be true in my case. When I went to the Baltic capitals, certainly on my first visit, I knew I was being followed but they tried to keep it fairly discreet despite the fact, which I didn't mention in our previous conversation, that on the way to my first visit to Riga in 1975, a personal visit not an official visit, I had actually yielded to the temptation, which I admit was unprofessional, of playing games with the KGB. I tried to lose them and I think I did lose them in the subway, for no particular reason other than that I don't like being followed. This was in Leningrad, not Riga; Riga has no subway. That might have been taken as justification for the KGB to, you know, keep a close eye on me in the future, but I did it only as a lark, frankly, because they were getting on my nerves, not because I had anything to hide.

When I was visiting the Baltic capitals officially in the early '80s, the only time I experienced really aggressive surveillance was in Vilnius. By accident I came across an active dissident in a cafï¿½, someone who had signed a manifesto against the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. I started talking to him and walking around with him, at which point the KGB was all over us like flies - Elizabeth was with me - and visibly trying to scare him off and scare me away from talking to him. But that's the only time they were aggressive. Other times I could tell they were there, but staying in the background.

Q: Well, this '81-'83 period again was early Reagan, and it was prior to Gorbachev, wasn't it?

SILINS: Yes, Gorbachev was in the Politburo but he was not yet a sure thing as a future leader.

Q: This was when the various leaders were dying over there.

SILINS: Right. Brezhnev was in power when I arrived, he died while I was in Leningrad and was replaced by Andropov. I might mention that when Brezhnev died there was the usual sort of hiatus before the death was actually announced. There was a fairly long period of somber classical music on Soviet radio as the leadership lined up their ducks. The morning they finally announced his death I had just taken Elizabeth to the train station to go off to Helsinki for some dental work and so I was taking care of our son Nico, who was about five years old at the time. Elizabeth gets on the train, we get back in the car, I turn on the radio and there's the announcement that Brezhnev is dead. So my first impulse, of course, is to go around and try to measure the public reaction to that. I took Nico along and we rode the subways and the buses and walked the sidewalks and tried to cover as much of the city as we could, to see what the reaction was. Interesting thing was, there was no reaction. It was very amusing. There was no reaction, although of course people had the radio on and the announcement was being made and so everyone knew, but there was no reaction. I guess they figured he had been as good as dead for a long time anyway. The only reaction I could elicit from a man on the street was a blast against Brezhnev: "Good riddance, he did a lot of the damage to the [Russian Orthodox] church."

Q: The war in Afghanistan was still going on and it seemed that there was going to be no end at this point. It started in December of '79. Was Afghanistan and the Russian reaction where you were a matter of interest to our consulate general?

SILINS: Well, it affected U.S.-Soviet relations and therefore impacted on the atmosphere in which we worked. But our emphasis, as I said, was more on Soviet internal issues and so we didn't really get much into foreign policy stuff with them. So Afghanistan was not a direct issue for us, no.

Q: What about the Baltic republics, were you and the embassy, not just you, looking to see what might happen? I mean, was there any feeling that eventually the Soviet Union might disintegrate?

SILINS: During this whole time, as you know, it had been our policy not to regard the Baltic States as an integral part of the Soviet Union, so we took various elaborate steps to make sure that our policy of non-recognition was not undercut. Among other things, we included in our consular district only the capitals of the Baltic States, not their entire territory. We also had restrictions on the rank of the American diplomats who could go there. For example, the ambassador never went to the Baltic capitals from Moscow and indeed the consul general never went from Leningrad, at least in my time. One of the ways in which I might say we actually expanded our non-recognition policy toward the Baltic States was that we, in fact I, drafted the first human rights reports on the Baltic States that were separate from the human rights report on the Soviet Union, to underline that we regarded them as separate territories. That said, I don't know of anyone at the consulate general or the embassy, myself included, who thought that in less than a decade the Baltic States would once again be independent and the USSR would be coming apart at the seams.

Q: How did we feel about the human rights aspect of the Helsinki Accords at that time?

SILINS: We thought that that was the most promising aspect of the Helsinki process and we were trying as hard as we could to use Basket III as a lever to open up opportunities with respect to the Soviet Union.

Q: Were you getting anything from Washington about this, do this, do that or something from the Human Rights Bureau?

SILINS: Well yes, there was a regular dialogue back and forth. By this time, as you know, we were doing annual human rights reports which are quite detailed and covered all aspects of the situation. There were also I think already at that time even more frequent CSCE (Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe) implementation reports being done.

Q: That's the council for the...

SILINS: It's the...

Q: It's OSCE (Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe) now.

SILINS: It's now OSCE, yes. Well, the original title was Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe. Conference because it had no independent structure, it was really an ongoing negotiation between all the European countries plus Canada and the U.S. It turned into a very useful forum and acquired a structure. So within the CSCE context there was also very intense discussion between our governments, Soviet and U.S., and in fact all East European governments on human rights issues, among other things. So yes, we were very busily working in the human rights field at that time. Plus emigration, of course, which had already been a major focus of interest.

Q: Was emigration going strictly from Moscow or were you involved in Leningrad?

SILINS: We were very much involved in Leningrad. There was a Jewish community that was quite active in Leningrad, refuseniks who were trying to get out and whom we were trying to help get out of there.

Q: How did that work? Was it still under the general mantle of emigration to Israel, although a good number didn't go to Israel, but was this still how it was structured?

SILINS: It had a broader basis now because of the CSCE conference. That is, our interest in the past used to be more narrowly focused on Jewish emigration, but because the CSCE conference had now broadened each country's obligations on human rights issues, including emigration, we were able to put it on a broader footing and argue that any signatory country was obligated to let people emigrate if they wanted to emigrate.

Q: How were the Soviets responding at this particular time?

SILINS: Grudgingly, to say the least. Their problem, of course, was they were afraid that it would open the floodgates. Their leadership knew very well that their system was unpopular and that if they were to enable everyone who wanted to go to leave they would lose many of their most talented people, so they were fighting like mad to keep the doors closed.

Q: How did that reflect as far as you were seeing things? People who would come to you to apply or I mean, were they kept from applying, or how did that work?

SILINS: Oh, it would work in different ways. Many of them would come to us and say they had been prevented from even obtaining application forms. Others who had succeeded in getting applications wouldn't have them accepted by the authorities, they would be turned down for various technicalities. Others would submit their applications and then would be refused permission to depart, for example on the argument that at some time they had had access to classified information. So there were lots and lots of different reasons. There was also the argument that, well, I'm sorry, you can't leave because you owe money or because the state has invested in your education and therefore that has to be paid back first. So there were endless arguments about this sort of thing.

Q: How did you find on this subject and other matters dealing with both the city government and other elements of the government in your consular district?

SILINS: We had some meetings with what was called OVIR, which handles visas and emigration issues, but for the most part our discussions with the city government were about operational issues, like support to the consulate, housing matters or staffing issues, that sort of thing, or courtesy calls and discussions for information about economic issues or what have you. So it was quite a different relationship from what the embassy in Moscow had with the ministries in Moscow. As I say, our focus was primarily on internal developments, not so much on the bilateral U.S.-USSR policy front.

Q: Did you have consular problems such as American tourists getting there and getting into trouble and that sort of thing?

SILINS: Oh sure. We had a whole range of things, including tourists dying. An elderly gentleman with a younger wife had become ill at their hotel but she refused to let him receive medical treatment. "Don't give him anything but enemas!" she insisted. He duly died and she departed as soon as she had obtained the documents she needed for insurance purposes. So we had that sort of thing, yes.

I vividly remember, too, the death of an American exchange professor who was visiting Latvia. Although he was 60 or so, his family claimed he had been in the pink of health and refused to believe he had died of a heart attack. They insisted that someone from the consulate go to Riga and attend the autopsy. As the consulate's resident Latvian, I was the obvious choice. In Riga I found the hospital leadership and relevant medical staff lined up to receive me at the hospital entrance as though I were some visiting surgeon general. They asked whether I wanted to view the entire autopsy or come in at the conclusion. I chose the latter. When I was invited in, the departed had been entirely disassembled and laid out on two metal tables. The head pathologist showed me scar tissue in the professor's heart that indicated previous heart trouble, probably mistaken for indigestion, and confirmed the diagnosis of a heart attack as cause of death. They could not have been more cooperative.

Q: How about arrest cases?

SILINS: I don't recall too much on that front. We had problems occasionally with the Marines working at the consulate, little pranks that they would pull. For example, once they swiped a Soviet flag, which led to a little bit of tension. But I don't recall anything serious.

Q: What was the situation with the local staff, the Soviet nationals who worked for the embassy? Because there'd been problems earlier on, how was that working while you were there?

SILINS: Well, I can't really think back to this without laughing because it was a comical situation, as we know now from hindsight. All our local employees were provided through a Soviet agency, of course, and so clearly they were selected because they could provide functions for the Soviet government, including the security services, not just to the consulate. And they provided us with some exceptional people, one of them a striking tall blonde who was the daughter of a man who I believe was the head of cultural affairs for the city of Leningrad. She was a real knockout and would just melt the Marines by looking at them. We also hired a Russian language instructor who was a slightly different type but also extremely attractive and also able to melt hearts with the crook of her little finger. So the KGB was sparing no effort in beautifying the consulate.

We also had a tragedy. The Marine Gunnery Sergeant was making his rounds one night. He had apparently climbed up in an awkward position to look out a staircase window at another window across the courtyard which looked onto our compound and which we knew was manned by Soviet security, and he fell. He fell and he had serious brain injuries. This happened at a time when I was in Helsinki. I arrived back a few days later and went to the hospital to visit him. We had to take him to a Soviet hospital, there was no choice at all because he would have died if we'd tried to move him out of the country. And so it was a very unusual situation where the senior Marine was given medical treatment in a Soviet facility. We set up a system of having someone there at all times but of course we couldn't actually be in the room when he was being treated. He had to have brain surgery, life-saving surgery, and they did save his life.

Q: How did you find the Marine guard system? The British tend to use retired sergeants and the like for their security people. The Marines, I know from my experience in Yugoslavia 20 years before, can prove to be a problem because they're young, lusty young men and up to pranks and drinking and everything else.

SILINS: Well, that's quite true. You have to take into account what hormones will do to the body of a young Marine. But frankly I like the Marines and I like the Marine security guard system. I like the uplift they give to the whole mission. They bring to it an energy, a pride that I think is worth the trouble. So I'm very happy with the system, frankly.

Q: Did you find from your local staff that despite the fact you knew where they were coming from and all, it was still a reflection of the society? I mean, these were people you could talk to and, you know, get a feel for the country and all that?

SILINS: Right. We decided that the advantages outweighed the disadvantages. We could, as you suggest, learn from them. And having people with very good connections in the Soviet government working in the consulate has lots of advantages. For example, we could get tickets to the Kirov Ballet at the snap of a finger, which is not to be sneezed at as a cultural experience. Also, lots of what we wanted to know was harmless and lots of what we did was harmless, by which I mean that most of diplomacy, in my estimation, does not need to be covert and does not need to be hidden, even from an enemy, because it doesn't give the enemy any advantage. One of the strengths of the United States has always been that we're so open that we flood our enemies with information. They don't know what to make of it, they don't know how to interpret the Congress any better than we do. So there's no need to hide all of these things. So I thought that we went way too far later, while I was on the Soviet desk, when we fired all of the local employees and tried to replace them with American contractors. That just created a different set of security problems, not necessarily less severe.

Q: Well, during this time, looking at the system, you had a leadership at the top which was either dead or dying with both Brezhnev and Andropov and sort of a never-ending war seemingly going on in Afghanistan and all. While you were looking at internal things, did you get any feel for the spirit of your consular district? I mean, about how they felt about the Soviet Union at all?

SILINS: It was apparent to us that almost everybody was cynical about the Soviet system. There were very, very few true believers by that time, even at senior levels. And so even though U.S.-Soviet relations were at a low point, internally in the Soviet Union I felt that change was inevitable, it was just a question of how rapid the pace of that change would be. What happened, of course, was that Brezhnev was replaced by Andropov, who also turned out to be sick and died a year later. Before he died, Andropov launched some reforms, including economic ones, which didn't go very far in themselves, but they contained another message. The message was that there was a recognition at the top that the problems of the USSR were very serious and that even though the leadership was not yet ready to take dramatic steps to deal with them, they at least were beginning to recognize them, so more far-reaching measures were coming down the road.

Q: What about the knowledge of the people you would talk to about what was happening elsewhere in the world? I mean, were they familiar with, you know, how badly off the Soviet Union was compared to the West?

SILINS: Those who had access to information from the West, and in Leningrad that was a lot of people because it was a popular tourist destination, probably had an exaggerated sense of how well off we were compared to them. They thought at that time, I believe, that we were some sort of paradise and so actually exaggerated the difference in many respects.

Q: Had the Jewish migration to Coney Island and other places in New York started yet?

SILINS: No, I think that came later. I don't recall that there was yet a big flood of...

Q: I was just wondering whether there was any back and forth of people who had left the Soviet Union supposedly on their way to Israel and were going to the United States, whether that was...

SILINS: The Soviet authorities would occasionally publish so-called acknowledgments by Jews who had gone to Israel, had been totally disillusioned, and had come back to the Motherland. It was hard to tell how much of that was accurate. Probably not much. At that time there was a pretty high dropout rate, as I recall, by Soviet Jews who departed the USSR to go to Israel but then changed course in Vienna and then went somewhere else, typically the U.S. No doubt those who left, whether for Israel or elsewhere, kept in touch in some way with their friends and relatives in the USSR, and kept them informed about how things were in the outside world.

Q: I was just wondering because, although the program was reportedly to help Jews go to Israel, the great majority had no intention of staying, a solid majority was going to the United States.

What about youth, particularly at the university level and all that? Was there any sort of contact with them?

SILINS: There was a fair amount of contact because there were also American students in Leningrad. So we could learn both directly through our contacts with Russian students and from talking to American students what their attitudes were. We didn't get the impression that Soviet students were going to be the cutting edge of political change. What we got was a reading that students were cynical about the system, were not true believers, would certainly welcome some change, but this was not one of those countries where students take to the streets and lead the revolution. We never got that impression in Leningrad.

Q: Where did one feel that the leadership for a new Russia, a new Soviet Union might come from if there was a target group?

SILINS: I'm not sure that we had a target group or that we were trying to build such an organization. The feeling was, which I think was largely proved true, that the Soviet leadership itself, that is the younger elements of it, those who had not aged so much that they were simply unable to accept that they had been wrong from the beginning, that the younger leadership itself would realize that the system simply couldn't go on as it was. They already were getting reports from their intelligentsia that they had to make radical political and economic reforms in order to avoid sinking below the level of countries like India and Brazil. This was the time when demographic analysis of the USSR was being done in the U.S. by Murray Feshbach, our leading expert at that time. He had begun to publicize the facts, which presumably the Soviet leadership already knew, that the USSR was the only industrial country in the world in which male life expectancy was diminishing, in which the infant mortality rate was rapidly climbing, and in which of course the alcoholism rate was reaching stupefying, literally, proportions. They knew all that and their own intelligentsia, their own academics knew that and were beginning to muster up enough courage to write reports, internal reports to the leadership that something had to be done about this.

Q: As one went about, did you go out into the consular district of Leningrad, I mean, what were you covering?

SILINS: We were covering essentially from Murmansk up in the north down to the Novgorod area and then of course the Baltic areas. I personally concentrated on the Baltic area. I went there regularly and probably made four or five visits to each of the Baltic capitals. I also went to Novgorod but there wasn't much happening there, which is not true today. In fact just yesterday I went to a talk by the governor of Veliki Novgorod here at the Kennan Institute, there's a lot happening in Novgorod now.

Q: What about to the north, Murmansk and all that?

SILINS: People from the consulate would regularly go up there and see what was happening. But in a political sense there wasn't much going on up there.

Q: Were you getting any feeling about the Soviet economy, both from being in Leningrad but also in these travels? You know, the Soviet Union was, particularly in the early Reagan period and before, being painted as a very dangerous enemy. Were you seeing any problems with the economy?

SILINS: Oh sure. We knew the economy was a shambles and so did the Soviet leadership. But the fact is that although we can today say with even more assurance that it was in terrible shape and simply doomed to collapse at some point, the fact is that they did have an enormous stockpile of lethal nuclear and other weapons. Their military, while probably somewhat overrated by us as a threat, was nevertheless a big and pretty competent force. So it's not true that the Soviet Union was entirely a paper tiger that should have been dismissed with the wave of a hand. It could not be dismissed. It was a dangerous place.

Q: Were there any other countries that had consulates in Leningrad?

SILINS: Yes, there were quite a few because of course it was considered an important city. The French and the Japanese and the Germans were quite active and there were a number of others.

Q: Did the consular corps constitute sort of an intelligence gathering? You know, an open intelligence gathering of sorts?

SILINS: Well sure. That's what diplomats do, diplomats gather intelligence, and there's nothing unusual about that.

Q: I mean for you all to get together and talk? I mean, were you able to get...?

SILINS: Oh yes. We had frequent meetings. We didn't have formal conferences but we saw each other all the time. Because of the restrictions on contacts with Soviet citizens we saw a lot of each other, so of course we swapped information all the time within the diplomatic corps.

Q: When you left there in '83, what was your impression of whither the Soviet Union?

SILINS: Well, it looked like it was really dragging its feet. A thumbnail sketch would be that I believed that the leadership did realize how bad the situation was. It couldn't help but realize it, but there were still a number of entrenched interests in the Central Committee and Politburo that were holding up progress, and it was not predictable at that time in which direction they would go. All we could tell was that some change had to be made, that there was a growing realization of that, but it was not clear that they were going to bite the bullet at that point.

Q: The Reagan administration was brand new during the time you were there and these were people who were coming, for the most part, out of conservative circles in California and elsewhere, they were not part of the so-called Eastern Establishment, which had reached certain accommodations with the world and the Soviets and all. Did you feel that there was a different direction as far as what you were looking at, how you were reporting or anything like that?

SILINS: Perhaps we can go into this in more depth when I talk about my job on the Soviet desk during the last part of the Reagan administration. As regards this assignment, again I have to emphasize that the focus of the U.S. consulate general was on domestic Soviet developments, not on the U.S.-Soviet relationship per se, and so we didn't really feel directly any policy outputs from Washington on how to conduct that relationship. In fact, I suppose somewhat foolishly we took a pride in that. I very infrequently went to embassy Moscow and we didn't really seek their guidance or input very much. We felt we had our own role to play and we were trying hard to play it as well as we could, but it was different from that of embassy Moscow.

Q: Well, it's a little bit like God bless the czar and keep him far away, which is the essence of that prayer. Who was our ambassador at that time?

SILINS: Art Hartman was ambassador for most my time but I'm not sure he was already in place when I arrived.

Q: Did he come down frequently?

SILINS: He came down at least once or twice, yes. I don't mean to imply there was no contact at all with the embassy.

Q: Oh no, I understand that.

SILINS: And the relations were fine. Yes, he did come down and look around.

Q: Well, you left there in '83 and then what?

SILINS: In '83 I went to Stockholm.

Q: Stockholm. Okay, so next we'll cover your going to Stockholm in 1983.

SILINS: Right.

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Q: Okay. Today is the 10th of February 2009, and after an interlude... It's been almost 20 years, hasn't it, or something like that?

SILINS: I hope it's not quite that long.

Q: Not that long, eleven years. And Ints, last time we left off we were at 1983, and you were off to Stockholm. What was your job going to be at Stockholm?

SILINS: Political counselor. I was coming from Leningrad, as it was then called, which had been a very interesting assignment during a not very pleasant phase, actually, of the U.S.-Soviet relationship. In Stockholm there was also a U.S.-Soviet angle. In one aspect of that I was only peripherally involved. There was a long-term arms control negotiation running with the Soviets for which we had a negotiating team in Stockholm, and I was their embassy contact person.

But the Soviet angle was also quite alive in the relationship with Sweden because of the notorious "Whiskey on the Rocks" submarine incident. The Soviets had managed to run a Whiskey class submarine aground in Swedish waters in 1981, very near Sweden's main naval base at Karlskrona. It was a serious incident and led to a tense standoff at the time, made worse by the fact that the Swedes thought they detected nuclear weapons on board. And ever since that the Swedes were keenly alert to any sign of violation of their waters. They kept getting signals, and they couldn't tell if they were really detecting submarines or is this coming from beavers or some kind of animal or what? So they needed technical help, and there was actually quite a lot of under the table cooperation between the Swedes and the U.S. on this topic. It was under the table because Sweden of course made a great point of being a neutral country. Unlike Norway, Sweden was not a member of NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization), and it wanted to present a public profile of being even-handed between us and the Soviet Union. Indeed when it came to public opinion in Sweden, the U.S. was still not very popular at this time because of the Vietnam War. Sweden had been very active in criticizing our intervention in Vietnam, and that ill feeling hadn't yet worn off.

I should also mention another U.S.-Soviet angle, which was not profound but I still get a tickle thinking about it. There is a fantastic aircraft that was developed for the CIA, a multi-supersonic reconnaissance jet, the SR-71, also known as the Blackbird. From time to time a Blackbird would come screaming in over the Baltic Sea from the west. Typically it would come in along the southern edge of the Baltic, passing near Poland and the Baltic States, then make a sharp U-turn near the Soviet border, near Leningrad, in fact, and then come back, theoretically over international waters, heading back west. Its purpose was signals intelligence and aerial photography, and indeed part of what it was trying to do was to trigger the Soviet air defense mechanisms so that we could get a reading on where their radars were and how they worked. This aircraft was going so fast - "traveling with the speed of heat," as one person described it - that it occasionally couldn't make the turn tight enough. It might nick Swedish airspace, which led to a rather elaborate dance. The Swedes, because they knew that the Soviets could see on their radars that the Blackbird had violated Swedish airspace, had to protest this violation. So what they did was to call me in, I was the political counselor and the person designated to deal with this task... call me in and sternly chew me out for the U.S. violation of their airspace. And then we would part company and go our separate ways until the next incident. Perhaps a similar ritual was being enacted in Helsinki.

As I say, this is not a particularly profound thing, but I happen to be a deep admirer of the technology that went into the SR-71. It was a fantastic aircraft and having this slight connection with it gives me a tickle.

Q: I spent some time a little earlier in Seoul, South Korea, and sometimes we'd be awakened at night when this thing would come over. They make a lot of noise.

You were in Stockholm from when to when?

SILINS: Eighty-three to '86.

Q: Who was the ambassador?

SILINS: Let's see. There were two in my time there, and I remember that both were Mormons, just by coincidence ... although it turns out that in that period a number of our ambassadors in the Nordic area were of the Mormon faith. The first one was an older man, Franklin Forsberg, in fact he celebrated his eightieth birthday on the job. The second was Greg Newell, who was younger but also of that persuasion.

Q: Yes. Well, I assume the Mormons had fairly active missionaries there. So many of the people who served as missionaries wanted to go back, you know, they had connections and all.

Speaking of the submarine thing, I assume our Navy was very much aware. They sure as hell didn't want to get involved in any intrusion into Swedish space... or in fact, did we have submarines operating in the Baltic?

SILINS: I don't know whether we did or not. We would occasionally bring other types of warships into the Baltic, simply to demonstrate that it was not a Soviet lake and that we had the right of free passage. About submarines, I really can't say. I would guess not, because it's such a difficult area to get into and out of.

Q: Sure. And I would imagine if anybody did it, it would be the Germans, maybe.

How did you find the political situation as it connected with the United States? I mean, the Vietnam War was over about eight years or so ago.

SILINS: Well, it still cast a lingering shadow over our relations because so many Swedes felt so deeply about it. And by the way, were largely justified, it seems in hindsight, in being very critical of U.S. actions during the Vietnam period. The Swedes also still had what, from our point of view, was a preachy and self-satisfied attitude. The Swedes have seldom been reluctant to give advice to other peoples or countries, and their prime minister, Olof Palme, was, if anything, particularly prone to do that. And the secretary general of the foreign ministry, Pierre Schori, who was very close to Palme, was outspokenly critical of what he considered imperialist U.S. policies. So that affected the tone of relations a bit. I remember once bringing a visiting official from Washington into Schori's office just after some Central American or Caribbean incident and being greeted with a snide, "Well, I assume you're not armed!"

I don't want to give the impression that relations were bad. They were friendly and cooperative. As I suggested, even with respect to security matters there was quite a lot of cooperation going on beyond what you would normally expect, given the public postures that the Swedes took.

Q: Well, in many ways the Swedes were probably more interested in and invested in military preparedness than most Europeans, weren't they? I mean, because they kind of had to do it on their own since they couldn't rely on NATO to take care of them.

SILINS: Right. That's a good point. They were just as active as the Swiss, for example, in structuring their self defense forces and they went to great lengths technologically to at least present the faï¿½ade of being able to defend themselves. For example, their highway system is built with widened stretches of straight road useable as landing strips for their military aircraft in case of invasion. They would regularly exercise their self-defense forces. So yes, they made a great point of being militarily capable, including the manufacture of jet aircraft and heavy artillery.

Q: Did they have universal military training there?

SILINS: Yes, I believe they did.

Q: How did Sweden act among its Baltic neighbors? Did it see itself as the leader?

SILINS: I believe it did. During this period Sweden was still viewed as having discovered that magic middle way between capitalism and communism. They were very prosperous and therefore felt that they had lessons to offer to others, not just about how to run the economy but how to build a healthy society, how to eliminate the large amounts of inequality that existed in other... in many capitalist countries. They still felt that they were in the lead, a bit ahead, a step ahead of the Norwegians and the Danes and the Finns. That era ended, actually, pretty close to this time, but they still felt that way.

As for their more distant Baltic neighbors - Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia - there I have to say that the record of the Palme government was quite disappointing. Palme had a personal connection to Latvia through his mother and had spent summers there as a boy. Despite that, he showed no inclination to stand up for the Balts against Russia in any way that I could see. Of course, that was more or less Swedish policy since World War II. Sweden had been quick to recognize the incorporation of the Baltic States by the USSR. There was an episode when some Latvian soldiers who had fled to Sweden were forcibly sent back to the USSR after the war. The soldiers protested fiercely, knowing what horrors awaited them, and I believe one committed suicide. This episode became the subject of annual Swedish expressions of remorse after the Baltic States regained their independence.

Q: How were they treating their Gastarbeiter, their foreign workers? Our maid, Vera Losiciu ... When we were in Yugoslavia some years before, she went to Sweden and worked in the Volvo factory. How were they treated at that time, the immigrants?

SILINS: To the best of my recollection, at that time there were still relatively few immigrants there and so it wasn't much of an issue yet. But you could see from occasional graffiti that some Swedes were no less prone than other countries to react negatively against people unlike themselves. You could already begin to sense the beginning of a problem.

Q: How about the media? I always think of the media, you know, as spending an awful lot of time pointing out the warts of the United States, the problems of the United States. Did you find that?

SILINS: The media as willing to point out warts in Sweden...?

Q: TV and newspapers, particularly?

SILINS: I would say that Sweden had among the freest media in the world and they were not averse to criticizing their own country or government as well as ours.

Q: What was the political situation there? Were there two major parties?

SILINS: The dominant party since the end of World War II was the Social Democrats. Beginning in 1976, though, as the bloom began to fade from the economy, sometimes the non-socialistmeaning the Moderates, the Center party and the Liberalsometimes managed to muster enough votes among themselves to form a government. As you can imagine, all of the non-socialists, although they were called "bourgeois" parties in Sweden, would fall well to the left of center on most issues in U.S. politics. They put together a center-right government in 1979 but it broke up. And so the Social Democrats, with Olof Palme as prime minister, returned to power in 1982, the year before I arrived on the scene.

Palme's assassination in 1986 was perhaps the most dramatic event during my time there. This was when security for top government figures was not raised to the paranoid level that it is today. Palme would sometimes simply walk around Stockholm, he would walk back and forth to his office. And this particular evening he and his wife had gone to the movie theater and were walking back home, and he was shot on the sidewalk. His wife was also wounded. And as it happens, because I was the embassy duty officer, I wound up informing the foreign ministry duty officer and through him much of the government that the assassination had taken place. That was because the shooting had immediately been reported by the Swedish media and picked up in the States, where we monitor the media very actively, before most Swedes had heard anything about it. So the news reached the State department operations center, which passed it to me after midnight. I called the foreign ministry duty officer, who passed it to the cabinet duty officeand so on to the rest of the Swedish government. It came as a tremendous shock, of course, to the Swedes. They just couldn't imagine that something like that could happen in their country.

Q: Was there a resolution as to why it happened?

SILINS: It was kicked back and forth over the years and frankly I simply stopped following it. After a botched initial investigation, there were several arrests and then a conviction, but it was overturned. To my knowledge, it's not certain who did it or why.

Q: Yes. Was the United States at all blamed?

SILINS: No, there was no serious suggestion that the U.S. was behind it.

Q: How did the Swedes get along during your time with Finland? Finland always had this rather dicey role of being next to the Soviets and having to accommodate them but yet pursue an independent course.

SILINS: The Swedes still thought themselves several steps ahead of the Finns, but you could tell that the situation was changing. The Finns are people that I admire greatly. They're extremely skilled, imaginative, innovative and determined. They've learned to play the very bad hand that they've been dealt geographically and economically. They were already developing the design skills at this time that in some ways put them ahead of the Swedes later. But the Swedes still thought that they were the older brother of the Finns and, generally speaking, acted accordingly.

Q: How about with the Norwegians? As I understand the area is replete with jokes, both by the Swedes and the Norwegians about each other, you know. How were relations at that time?

SILINS: There was less contact between the Norwegians and the Swedes because in general the Norwegians are more westward-looking, given their geography. And they were active NATO members and they brought a different mentality to the game. So although all the Scandinavians had an active, official network of interaction through cabinet members, parliamentary structures and so forth, I didn't see that much interplay, in my work, between Norwegians and the Swedes.

Q: Had the Helsinki Accords been signed at this point?

SILINS: Sure. The Accords were signed in '75.

Q: Yes. So, was it seen at that time that this was an important thing?

SILINS: Oh, definitely, yes. It was clear by this time that the Helsinki Accords were going to have a very large, unexpected effect - unexpected at least by the Soviets. The Accords turned into a lever to pry into the inner workings of Soviet society through Basket III, which had to do with human rights and press freedoms and things like that. It had a tremendous influence that was already visible at this time.

Q: Were there any particular issues that affected you or that you got involved in between the United States and Sweden?

SILINS: The main one, which was, as I say, not conducted so much in public as in private, had to do with issues related to the submarine incursions and in general security issues having to do with the Soviet Union. That was kind of the main basket of things. There was also the fact that Sweden was playing host to arms control negotiations. There was flourishing trade between the U.S. and Sweden. Relations, generally speaking, were constructive and moving pretty smoothly.

Q: How about the Swedish role in Africa? The Swedes, particularly in East Africa, seem to have played a much broader role than one might think.

SILINS: That may be true, but it wasn't much of a bilateral issue when I was there. One angle that interested me, because of my previous assignment in Haiti, was the Swedish approach to foreign aid. As you may remember, the Swedes made quite a point of the fact that they contributed a larger percentage of their gross national product to foreign assistance than most countries. They had a very active program through their aid agency, SIDA, and this was an area where they would often compare themselves to us, with the U.S. having a relatively small proportion of its GDP given to foreign aid. I was interested because foreign aid is not easy to do. That is to say, it's not easy to help other countries in an effective way. More money doesn't always mean more results, and I could see that from Haiti, which turned out to be almost impossible to help. And so I was interested to know if the Swedes had found some magic formula that would work where others had failed. I'm not convinced that they had.

Q: Yes. And of course one of the elements of foreign aid that often is overlooked is that we have and always have had a very significant amount of aid going through private and non-governmental organizations. That doesn't often get into the statistics.

SILINS: That's quite true. Most countries do not have as large a private component to their foreign assistance as we do.

Q: Well then, you left there in '86, was it?

SILINS: Yes, that's right, the summer of '86. But not before another Soviet-style drama burst upon us. You may remember a certain Soviet nuclear reactor blew up at the very end of that April. Well, the prevailing winds were toward the northwest, and so Sweden became the first western country to detect and report what we now know as the Chernobyl disaster. One of Sweden's own nuclear plants was monitoring radiation levels, and at first they thought they had sprung a serious leak themselves. I'm sure you also remember the appalling way the Soviet government handled the tragedy, with lies, denials and delays that cost many lives. If anyone needed final proof that the Soviet system was broken, Chernobyl provided it.

Q: Where'd you go then?

SILINS: Then I went to Harvard for a year as a fellow at CFIA, the Center for International Affairs. It's now the Weatherhead Center. It was a foreign policy oriented program at Harvard which invited some rather senior foreign officials, many of them ambassadors or former ambassadors or members of government or generals, to spend a year at Harvard. The State Department usually sent one person and our military usually sent two.

It was a fascinating year. There were only two requirements. You had to write a paper and you were expected to participate in a weekly seminar, usually featuring a guest speaker that one of the fellows rounded up. Other than that you could do just about anything you wanted on the Harvard campus, including auditing courses. And so I did a good deal of that, including sitting in on courses and lectures at the Kennedy School.

Q: How this was the CFIA program organized, did it have a certain policy? What was it trying to do?

SILINS: I think what the CFIA program was meant to do was bring reality to the Harvard campus. That is to say, those who set it up, which included Robert Bowie and Henry Kissinger, felt that Harvard's professors were too removed from world affairs to have a realistic assessment of what was going on in the world. The CFIA fellows program was intended to bring to campus people who had real-world on-the-ground experience. That's why CFIA invited senior diplomats, government officials and military officerfor example, there was an Israeli general in my grouso that they could give the straight story to the professors and help them to sharpen their understanding of how the world really works. For the State Department and U.S. military participants, it was a good networking opportunity and also a chance to work with some of the top scholars in fields they were interested in.

I confess I did something a bit mischievous. When it was my turn to arrange a speaker for our weekly seminar, I invited Noam Chomsky. You probably know that after he attained iconic status in philosophical linguistics, Chomsky became a scathing critic of U.S. foreign policy. Since he was teaching right next door at MIT, I thought, what the heck, let's have a change of pace. It certainly was. Among other things, he called President Reagan a war criminal. After that session, a catchphrase among our group of fellows became, "Who invited Chomsky?"

Q: You were at Harvard around the beginning of the Gorbachev phenomenon, weren't you?

SILINS: Yes. And because I knew I'd be going next to the State Department's Soviet Desk, I wrote a paper on the Gorbachev reformtheir origins, what they amounted to so far, and how we might be able to influence them. My research showed that what Gorbachev was doing had much in common with a modernization plan drafted by Andrei Sakharov and submitted to the Soviet leadership in 1970. Gorbachev hadn't gone as far as Sakharov recommended a decade and a half earlier, though.

Q: You've been in Leningrad and Sweden, you've watched the demise of Brezhnev and Andropov and Chernenko and the appearance of Gorbachev; how were you viewing this?

SILINS: With keen interest, and I'll tell you why. Not only because I would be going to the Soviet Desk. I had an experience between Stockholm and Harvard in 1986 that really opened my eyes to what was going on in the Soviet Union in the Gorbachev era. What happened was this.

The year before, there had been a U.S.-Soviet, shall we say, informal interaction, a meeting at Chautauqua, New York involving both government officials and members of the public. I don't remember now who initiated this series of Chautauqua meetings but they were in the spirit of the people-to-people contacts that President Eisenhower is associated with. The first U.S.-Soviet Chautauqua was held in '85 in the U.S. The idea was that they would alternate between the Soviet Union and the United States, so in '86 it was the Soviets' turn to host. And, as you mentioned, it was now the Gorbachev era, so the Soviets were more open to this sort of interaction.

They invited the American side to send a delegation to Latvia, to a town called Jurmala on the Baltic coast, near Riga - for several reasons, one of them mischievous. The overt reason was that Jurmala was the place most like Chautauqua, New York that they could think of, in terms of a setting by the water and general laid-back ambiance, in the Soviet Union. The mischievous reason was that they knew, because we kept telling them this, that the United States did not officially recognize the incorporation of Latvia and Estonia and Lithuania into the Soviet Union. And so they probably thought, well, let's stick it a little bit to the Americans. Will they actually have to refuse our invitation? Indeed, we came pretty close to not going, because part of the Baltic-American community got quite agitated at the prospect of what they thought might be implicit recognition of the annexation of Latvia by a delegation which was going to have very senior people in it, coming to such a meeting.

I was asked to go along in part to calm the Baltic-Americans, to show them, look, it's going to be all right, a State Department officer of Baltic origin, sensitive to your concerns, very familiar with Latvia and the Baltic States and our non-recognition policy, will be on the scene. As I think I mentioned earlier, when I was in Leningrad I made several visits to all of the Baltic capitals and I was personally convinced that it was absolutely the right thing to do, you had to maintain contacts instead of trying to freeze any sort of interaction with these countries. I believed that if we refuse to go there, we just make it very difficult for people who want to be in touch with the West to do so. So, although there was a dramatic development that almost derailed the 1986 conference - the arrest by the Soviets of American reporter Nick Daniloff - we were able to persuade the Baltic-American community that this was going to be okay, it was not going to amount to implicit recognition.

Indeed, the centerpiece American presentation at Jurmala was a talk by Jack Matlock, who at that time had the Soviet portfolio at the National Security Council. He became our ambassador to Moscow the next year. Matlock, in Russian and phonetic Latvian and English, clearly stated U.S. non-recognition policy in a way that was carried in Soviet media covering this conference. So it had a strong impact way beyond what we could have hoped to do during the Brezhnev era, when the U.S. had almost no direct access to the Soviet media. It was fascinating to watch how things were changing.

We came with a planeload of people that ranged from officials like Matlock and Mark Palmer, who was also a Soviet expert, to outstanding private citizens like Susan Eisenhower and Strobe Talbott, who was then Time's Soviet expert but eventually became deputy secretary of state. There were musicians like Grover Washington, an African-American jazz musician, and singer Karen Akers - all kinds of people. It was an extremely talented and intelligent group. On the flight over, I circulated a paper I had written, a capsule history of Latvia and its perilous existence under Soviet occupation, to members of the delegation who wanted to know more about the country we were about to visit.

And our delegation contained young Latvian-Americans, all of them speakers of the language. They included Ojars Kalnins, who later became Latvia's ambassador to the U.S. - after giving up his American citizenship; and Nils Melngailis, who became prominent in the Riga business community. This group came with little lapel-pin flags, American and Latvian flags together, which they handed out. This was actually more provocative than it sounds. The red-white-red striped flag of Latvia was still illegal in the Soviet Union because it was a symbol of independent Latvia. But lots of these were passed out.

The official program focused on a series of speeches and dialogues at the conference site, but more interesting really were the contacts outside the auditorium. For example, the musicians would have jam sessions with local musicians. As a sidebar, they got a candid picture of life for Latvians under Soviet rule. After one of these accounts of oppression and discrimination, Grover Washington commented, "Latvians are the Negroes of the Soviet Union!"

Many of these events, including some of the unstructured meetings and talks on the perimeter of the conference between our delegation and members of the crowd that had flocked uninvited to the scene, were broadcast by local Latvian television. This was absolutely stupefying and unprecedented at the time. And the word spread to other parts of the USSR. So this event had, I'd say, a real impact on the evolution of events in the whole Soviet Union, giving a measurable push toward its breakup.

Q: Were you getting any feedback from Soviet types about Gorbachev and where things are going? Was there a wariness or sort of a delight or what was going on?

SILINS: There were very mixed feelings - a feeling of great potential but great uncertainty - in Latvia, in the Soviet Union and in Washington. You could feel the lid being lifted off the Soviet pressure cooker but no one was sure what was going to pop out or what Gorbachev's goal was. Probably including Gorby. Well, I wasn't involved in the Washington debates when I was at Harvard. When I came to the Soviet desk the following year, in the summer of '87, a consensus was emerging that, whatever Gorby's intentions, his reforms were for real. Most important, they offered a chance to transform our poisonous relationship with the Soviets into something more constructive across the board, from arms control to human rights. And that's what the Soviet desk worked flat-out to do. Despite the fact that this was the Reagan presidency, forever identified with labeling the Soviet Union the Evil Empire.

Then came the 1988 election and the transition to the Bush Administration. At the State Department, Jim Baker and his team took over from George Shultz. To our surprise and dismay, most of our projects ground to a halt and there was, I would say, a wasted six months while the new team went through an analysis of, you know, is it really true that some sort of reform is taking place in the Soviet Union or is this possibly a giant scam? It was, I thought, a really odd transition. It was not like a transition from one Republican administration to another but like one from, say, a Democratic to a Republican president, a takeover by a group that obviously didn't trust the previous one, either its policies or its personnel. And I hold this against Jim Baker to this day; he wasted time, he weakened the institution of the State Department and he conducted the transition like a hostile takeover.

Q: Yes. You know, in many ways it was odd. And was anybody ... I know, with the Soviets you were trying to analyze what was going on politically in the Soviet Union but were you getting any of those talents turned to figure out what the hell was going on in the Reagan-Bush changeover? I mean, politically, why was this happening?

SILINS: Partly it was Jim Baker's style, partly it was that beyond Jim Baker there were lots of conservative Republicans who simply could not believe that the Soviet Union, which was their, you know, ultimate devil, could possibly be transforming itself. They simply couldn't believe that it was genuine; they were afraid that they were being tricked into something and so they were going to be very, very careful to avoid that. And there's another element. I mean, even for some of us who had no doubt whatsoever that something fundamental was going on, you get used to working within a given context. We've all heard this. There are many Cold Warriors who miss the structure that came with that period. It was very clear then who the enemy was, and although it sounds like a bad thing, it actually made it relatively easier to tell what you should do, how you should go about things. Problems presented themselves in a crisper manner than they did afterwards when the whole world seemed to be going to hell. So there was a little bit of that, but a lot of it, I think, was Jim Baker, who came in with his own small group to occupy all the positions of power. Of course Baker was not unique in mistrusting the State Department. Lots of those who became secretary of state did not trust the State Department. They thought we were captives of the governments to which we were supposed to be representing U.S. interests, they didn't realize how willing we are and how able we are to serve whatever administration comes in. So there was a lot of wasted effort during that time.

Q: Well, you were on the Soviet desk from when to when?

SILINS: From the summer of '87 until roughly the summer of '89. The Shultz period was really the Golden Age of the Soviet desk. Because of the importance Shultz gave to U.S.-Soviet relations and the extent to which he personally became engaged in them, he dealt directly with the Soviet desk. It was one of the few times when a country desk had routine, sometimes daily, contact with the secretary of state.

Q: Did you have a feeling that Ronald Reagan was much of a presence in the Soviet-American relationship?

SILINS: Absolutely. It's easy to dismiss Reagan as an intellectual lightweight but the reason that Reagan in many minds, and not just Republicans, is a great president, although he certainly made some big mistakes like the Iran-Contra thing, is that he had the ability to capture a spirit and to galvanize people around a project. With respect to the Soviets he came within a hair's breath of reaching global nuclear disarmament.

Q: This is a side of Reagan that is often discounted.

SILINS: Right. I mean, he was not afraid to do things that most others wouldn't even dream of because it was just so far outside the box. So he had that ability. He was not a stupid man. I think he had a very strong impact.

Q: Well, for one thing he wasn't a detail person but he certainly did develop the theme, you might say.

SILINS: Right. And he gave a lot of authority to Shultz who was, I think, one of the most competent secretaries of state that we've had and was very much a detail man and set up a very effective structure for dealing with Soviet issues, with lots of teams that were in virtually a permanent negotiation to move things forward.

Q: When you arrived in, let's see, '87 on the Soviet desk, there must have been a hell of a lot of internal debate on, you know, is Gorbachev ... or, where is the Soviet Union going?

SILINS: Right.

Q: In a way, looking at it later, I don't think Gorbachev knew where it was going but I mean, this is so different from what had been going on for 40 years, 50 years.

SILINS: That's very true. As I say, particularly in the early years, there was a lot of suspicion that this wasn't all that it appeared and that it couldn't possibly be going as far as it was.

I had one advantage that I've mentioned, which was that I had been there to see what was happening at the Chautauqua conference. I saw with my own eyes the extent to which the media had been, at least in that setting, unleashed, the extent to which people were being allowed to express their own views. And the views that they were expressing were now also known to me personally. So I wasn't nearly as likely to be paranoid about being duped. I came to the Soviet Desk after that '86 experience much more convinced that Gorbachev was unleashing forces that would cause significant reforms. To this day I believe, as you suggested, that he didn't know where these forces were going to take his country. He had no intention, I'm convinced, of causing the collapse of the Soviet Union. He wanted to rejuvenate and strengthen it. But the buttons he knew how to push were buttons that had already been pushed by Andropov. It was the anti-drinking button and it was the economic acceleration button, and neither of these were the solution. Then he opened that Pandora's Box of glasnost, letting 1,000 voices blossom, and that really began to pull things apart.

Q: Within the Soviet desk, was there a cadre of the old Kremlinologists? Because I would imagine Kremlinology would not work very well during the Gorbachev period. Maybe I'm wrong on that.

SILINS: No, you're right. It used to be, as you know, that we would try to get a lot of mileage out of seating charts at public events, see who was sitting next to whom and that sort of thing. Now, this was mostly out of the window, although not entirely, of course, because Gorbachev's own political position was not yet totally secure. Indeed, as we saw, he came very close to being snuffed out by leadership who opposed what he was doing or were afraid of the forces he had unleashed.

I should mention, though, that it wasn't all just a period of letting 1,000 flowers blossom vis-ï¿½-vis the Soviet Union. U.S.-Soviet relations were extremely complicated at this time by the leftovers of the Cold War, the biggest one of which was espionage. During this time we were dealing with the aftereffects of the hyperactive espionage of both sides and I was thrust into it because part of my brief on the Soviet desk was to deal with those kinds of issues, at least in the administrative sense. I wasn't the technician or the security guy but, let's say, the political management aspects of espionage were my thing.

My title was Deputy Director for Bilateral Political Relations of the Office of Soviet Union Affairs. Called Bilat, it was the biggest section because it covered such a grab bag of issues - everything from internal Soviet political relations to human rights to student exchanges to nationality questions to various aspects of security and intelligence activities. And at this time we had major espionage scandals. This was when we were discovering that both Embassy Moscow and Consulate General Leningrad, where I had worked, were absolutely infested with microphones and cameras. So that we could be sure that virtually everything we said had been picked up by the KGB. We also were building a new embassy in Moscow at this time and had just discovered that the very structure, the very girders and beams of the building were penetrated with espionage apparatus that we didn't understand. A whole industry was set up near the CIA headquarters in McLean, Virginia, to try to figure out what the hell the Soviets were up to. So we'd ship pieces of girders and steel back to cut apart and analyze.

We also had some defectors at this time. When a Soviet citizen defected to us, the procedures were ritualized. We generally made him or her available promptly to a representative of the Soviet embassy to show that the defection was voluntary and not coerced. For example, I was positioned backstage at the Kennedy Center during a performance by the visiting Kirov Ballet, just in case any dancers decided to defect. They didn't, but it gave me an eye-opening view of the athleticism of ballet, with dancers being massaged and rubbed down in the wings like boxers between rounds. For the record, most ballerinas are as sinewy as greyhounds up close. It was my job to do that kind of thing, as well as to keep in touch with the FBI regarding counterintelligence. So all this was going on at this time. Also, the Soviets were building a new embassy in Washington and they had managed to procure a site at just about the highest point of the city ...

Q: Right by the National Cathedral.

SILINS: ... just below the National Cathedral, overlooking the whole city, where of course they had a line of sight for antennas and cameras on practically the whole U.S. government. So all of this also was going on. It was a complex time.

Q: How did you find the Soviet embassy? Were you seeing a change, you might say, in the personnel or was it pretty much a pretty disciplined KGB-type organization?

SILINS: Well, I would say that the Soviet embassy was not keeping pace with Gorbachev in reforming itself, but it was clear on all sides, really, that the situation was changing significantly and that if Gorbachev were to have his way it would continue to change in the future and the important thing was for us to not to overplay our hand but to encourage the process and to let it blossom.

Q: This is the time when Reagan and Gorbachev met in Geneva, wasn't it, or was it Zurich or...?

SILINS: There were a number of meetings.

Q: I mean, was there concern among you all on the desk that maybe the president's going to get too friendly with this guy and give away the store or something? Was this a concern?

SILINS: Oh sure. There were certainly those who, first of all, were afraid that Reagan simply didn't understand all the ins and outs of this complex relationship. He might be a good poker-playing American but he couldn't deal with the chess-playing Soviets and therefore would be snookered. Not very different from the attitude of most staffers toward their superiors. Most staffers are afraid that their superior's going to get off the reservation and that's why we provide them with talking points and strategy papers and all the rest of it. Reagan did have a tendency to go beyond those and I suggested, I think, often that can be very fruitful. But sure, there were lots ... especially those Republicans who thought that the whole thing was a fraud were very worried that Reagan would be taken advantage of.

Q: Speaking of these, I've talked to some NSC staffers who during this period used to get very worried when Reagan would disappear into the Oval Office with either Maggie Thatcher or Brian Mulroney of Canada because what the hell is this guy going to do, you know? I mean, he's too close to these people and he might do things that ...

SILINS: There's almost the feeling that they don't have the right to speak privately to other leaders. Actually, you could make that argument because, after all, they're not private individuals; they're speaking for the country as a whole.

Q: But staff often tends to be ...

SILINS: Overly protective.

Q: Overly protective and basically a straight line, you know, this is the way it's always been....

SILINS: Incremental approach, at best.

Q: ...isn't paid to say why don't we try this or that. I mean, it really takes a leader to do that.

Who were some of the people you were working with on the desk? Would these people later get involved in continuing Soviet affairs?

SILINS: Yes, they did, and beyond that, too. At that time the Soviet desk had some extremely talented people on it, as did the whole European bureau.

The office director when I arrived on the scene was Mark Parris, a former administrative officer who had turned into a brilliant all-around Foreign Service officer. He went on to the NSC and then became ambassador to Turkey. His deputy was John Evans, who later served as ambassador to Armenia. Mark Parris was replaced by Sandy Vershbow, who went on to become ambassador to NATO, to Russia and then to South Korea. Sandy's deputy was Larry Napper, who succeeded me as ambassador to Latvia and went on to serve as ambassador to Kazakhstan. Steve Pifer, the talented officer who handled arms control and other multilateral issues, became ambassador to Ukraine. Nancy McEldowney, who also worked on multilateral issues, became ambassador to Bulgaria. Victoria Nuland went on to be ambassador to NATO. Directly above us on the sixth floor was someone with whom we met every morning, Deputy Assistant Secretary Tom Simons. Tom was Mark Parris' predecessor as director of Soviet affairs and he was now overseeing the USSR and Eastern Europe. He went on to be ambassador to Poland and to Pakistan.

That's just a sampling. It was a high-octane team, able to work directly with the secretary of state to take advantage of an unprecedented opening into the Soviet Union through Gorbachev. I was lucky to be one of the dimmer stars in that bright constellation.

Q: It wouldn't have probably been in your area but were we seeing, at this time, the Soviet empire beginning to collapse? I mean, there are two elements; one, of course the Western bloc of Czechoslovakia, Poland and all that, and the other one is internally the Stans and other republics. Were we seeing any loosening there?

SILINS: Oh definitely. It was already clear there was something on the horizon. It was initially no bigger than a man's hand but we felt it was going to turn into a major storm. Remember that Reagan, when he was in Berlin in the summer of 1987, called on Gorbachev to "tear down this wall," so there was already at the highest level thinking that the fundamental structure of the Soviet empire was subject to change. And as I say, while the Baltic States are small in themselves, what I had seen in Latvia was a harbinger, a clear telltale that something very big was striving to burst forth. And while most Baltic Americans were hesitant to predict the immediate success of an independence movement there, a minority was already calling for it and saying it was going to happen. So yes, clearly something momentous was afoot.

Q: Was there a feeling that time had moved on and with the Helsinki Accords and change in the world and all, that the good old days of running tanks into a country ï¿½ lï¿½ Czechoslovakia or East Germany as a means to control things were probably over?

SILINS: Up to a point, yes. Up to a point. Once it was clear that the Soviets were finished in Afghanistan, with the troop withdrawal beginning in the spring of 1988 and completed the next year, that in itself was the big harbinger of change. And it was clear from what he said and what he did that Gorbachev as Soviet leader would be extremely reluctant to resort to force ... Although I must say that in the Baltic States in 1990-91 Gorbachev at least passively acquiesced in an abortive attempt to snuff out the uprisings there by Soviet special forces, the OMON. But things had already changed dramatically all over the map. For example, a country where I served previously, Romania, which had been the home of one of the last Stalinists in Europe, Nicolae Ceausescu ... Well, Ceausescu and his wife were snuffed out in the most brutal way, executed by a firing squad, and you couldn't have a clearer signal that something big was afoot. Of course, that wasn't until the end of 1989, on Christmas Day, in fact.

In the two years before that, when the trend was less clear, some of us on the Soviet desk and at Embassy Moscow were already brooding about the possible blind alley that Gorby's reforms might be heading into. And we can be sure that conservatives and reactionaries in the Communist Party were, too. It had to do with the seeming incompatibility of democracy with the way Russia had always been ruled, except for that brief interlude just before the Bolsheviks seized power. And the notion of a democratic Soviet Union seemed a contradiction to those who knew - as Gorbachev perhaps did not, given his naï¿½ve idea that that Baltic States would willingly become a sort of test bed for Soviet economic reforms - that without the threat of force, the thirst for independence would tear many of the constituent republics away from Mother Russia.

Q: Was there a concern, although it wasn't in your bailiwick, that maybe Germany might all of a sudden end up as a united neutral country? Because this was one of the nightmares, I think, as people looked upon the European situation.

SILINS: Yes. That was of course a fundamental issue but not one I was personally wrestling with on the Soviet desk.

Q: Getting back to the espionage thing, was anybody trying to tell both the KGB and the CIA, for God's sakes, knock it off, fellas, or calm it down? Or were they almost free agents?

SILINS: Well, I don't think they're free agents. Mostly they were carrying out government policy, although of course working in hyper-secrecy does rather invite rogue adventures. I think the root problem is a temptation on the part of government officials to regard illicitly obtained information as somehow more valuable than what is learned through open sources. It's a keyhole-peeping mentality and it's unfortunately found in most countries.

I have spent a fair amount of time in positions, beginning with my very first one in Saigon, with access to very sensitive classified information. You know, so-called codeword information. At that first job it was because I was the aide to the ambassador. The Executive Secretariat, the Romanian desk and the Soviet desk also brought their own access. From what I have seen, this stuff is often overrated. And very often what we lose in the acquisition through the blowback from the way we got it, which tends to breed, at a minimum, mistrust of our activities, is greater than what we actually gain from the information. In other words, there is a net loss to the national interest through the trouble and cost of getting the information compared to the benefit of having it. Naturally there are dramatic exceptions. In war, of course, good intelligence is absolutely essential and can be decisive. But when you turn illicit information-gathering into a routine peacetime activity that is habitually and aggressively exercised from your diplomatic platforms, from your embassies and other places that fall under your flag, I think the costs are often greater than the gains. And I think we need to rein it in.

Q: I agree with you completely; I've had the same experience, I think most of us have. There's an interesting book, I have it on the table there, "Legacy ..."

SILINS: I know it, I have it also. It's a sad tale.

Q: ..."of Ashes." I didn't know it was being written but when I got the book, I'm quoted in there, one of my oral histories, but I found that the man had used, I think it's '77, our oral histories, in documenting the darker, less effective side of CIA operations. Because there is, as you mentioned, the blowback. I mean, when you do these things it sounds great, in wartime you don't really give a damn, but in peacetime you have to consider the consequences.

SILINS: Well, you have to consider the consequences even in wartime. When it comes to acquiring information in wartime one thing you should not do, for example, is torture, which is a kind of espionage; that is, illicitly obtained information. You may think at the time that the returns will justify it, but the long-term impact is horrendous because it means that your own people are more likely to be treated in the same way. And of course it elicits hate and a thirst for revenge, so it multiplies your enemies.

The Foreign Service has not found a credible voice in addressing the questions of intelligence collection and covert action. I think we feel inhibited in doing so and I'm not quite sure what the answer is. The mere fact that you're talking about classified matters is in itself a great inhibition, of course. There is also the fear of seeming naï¿½ve or weak if you argue for trimming back the intelligence services, just as when you call for military cutbacks. We may have to wait for a secretary of state who understands the issue well enough to speak at cabinet level in a way that will swing back the balance. Just in terms of resources, the amount of money and human talent that is dedicated to intelligence is so much greater than what is devoted to traditional diplomacy that I think it has to be reined in. Our country is not being well served.

Q: Most of the so-called human intelligence is intelligence that's bought, that's paid for. And if you pay for something, that immediately taints the information because obviously there's a profit motive in producing it.

SILINS: Right, an inherent conflict of interest. If you pay somebody for information, that person, in order to get more money, will come up with more information. He'll try to figure out what kind of information you want and may fabricate it. And that's been documented year after year.

By the way, during the two years I spent on the Soviet desk the intelligence community seemed to be stepping up attempts to harness the Foreign Service as part of its collection apparatus. Mostly a holdover of Cold War thinking, I guess, but it was also motivated by the revelations of Soviet intelligence penetration that were surfacing. The idea was to coordinate the State Department's diplomatic information-gathering efforts with the intelligence-collection activities of our covert services so that the two would reinforce each other through an integrated collection plan. Sounds reasonable, on the surface. But it creates a pressure to push diplomats into doing things that, at a minimum, would be considered violations of privacy, or worse. And that reduces their access and effectiveness because, let's face it, most of the truth is going to leak out sooner or later.

Q: Well then, when you left ... The question I always ask of somebody who moved jobs in the summer of '89, where did you think things were going? I mean, did you see something happening?

SILINS: Yes, I definitely saw something happening. I did not at that time expect that the Baltic States would be independent within a couple of years. I guess I tend to be more of an incrementalist in projecting the future than I should be. It's hard to apply the concept of "tipping points" to foreign policy. I was sure that change was coming all through Eastern Europe and the Baltic States; no question about that at all. But the pace of it overtook me. I did not expect Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania so quickly to become "Three Mice that Roared" and helped topple the Soviet Union.

After the Soviet Desk I went to Strasbourg as consul general. It was interesting because Strasbourg was also the headquarters of the Council of Europe. Not to be confused with the European Parliament, the Council of Europe was a collection of European nations that predates the European Union. It had already become the site of an important meeting between Gorbachev and European leadership. He had been invited to address a session of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe. It was clear that the Council of Europe wanted to play a role in healing the rift in Europe caused by the Iron Curtain. So I saw that my job in Strasbourg would keep me in touch with this historic development, the reintegration of Europe.

Q: Before you went out, we're still talking about leading up to the summer of '89... I take it you maintained some contact with some of the Baltic groups in the United States. Did you?

SILINS: I was not very active in the Baltic-American community or the Latvian-American community. I was one of those immigrant children who early on decided that, by God, I was very lucky to be in America and that's where I was going to hang my hat. And so only because my mother pretty much forced me to did I keep up my knowledge of the Latvian language. I bless her for it but it was not my natural inclination.

Q: Well, I was wondering whether from anywhere, not necessarily from your own personal contacts but whatever contact you had, was there growing excitement within the Baltic community in the States? Was there seen to be any change in the future?

SILINS: Yes, there was. But there was still a shadow of the debate I mentioned in connection with the Chautauqua conference, about the extent to which we in the West should maintain contact with people in the Baltic States. That is, the extent to which we should welcome visitors from there and the extent to which we should go there ourselves. During the Cold War period we knew that any delegation from the Baltic States to the U.S. had at least one KGB watchdog and often more than that. Likewise, contacts in the Baltic States by Americans often were either monitored by the KGB, or at a minimum people with whom we had contact were questioned afterwards by the KGB. So there was this dilemma of whether we should collaborate in some sense in this KGB activity or not. I was always on the side of those who said yes, it's a bad thing, we try to work around the KGB when we can, but you can't let this be an excuse for simply cutting off all contacts. Not everyone in the U.S. agreed with that, not everyone in the Baltic-American community. Just as, to take an especially sad case, many in the Cuban-American community have long been for a rock-hard, and I think futile, policy of trying to isolate Castro, which has been notably unsuccessful.

Q: Yes. Played right into his hands.

SILINS: Right.

Q: Well then, in Strasbourg... It was the European Union when you went there, or was it still the European Community?

SILINS: First of all, the organization that I was to work with was not the European Community, as it was called then, but the Council of Europe. And the parliamentary body I would be in touch with was not the European Parliament, which was the legislative side of the European Community, but the similar-sounding Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe. But the similarities and seeming overlap of the two organizations and their sub-units quickly lead to eye-watering confusion!

Only a handful of specialists had any idea what the Council of Europe was. It was not the European Community; it's a separate organization. And it had a larger membership - more countries - than what is now called the European Union. It's more inclusive but it doesn't assert, as the European Union does, supranational rights over its members. It operates on the basis of conventions, treaties and agreements covering important areas. Some of these are technical, such as standards for pharmaceutical products, but they include the fight against terrorism and human rights. It is the overseer of the European Convention on Human Rights and it hosts the European Human Rights Court. As the former Warsaw Pact countries and eventually Russia joined the Council of Europe and accepted its requirements, the Human Rights Court and the Convention exerted positive, even decisive influence on the reform of their legal systems. So the Council of Europe does critically important things, but even in the State Department maybe only three or four people had any idea of what it was and how it was different from the European Community.

Q: Well, in its inclusivity, did it include Turkey?

SILINS: Yes, it did.

Q: What was the background of the formation of this organization?

SILINS: It goes back to the dream of a united states of Europe that Churchill called for in 1946. Unlike the organization that eventually became the European Union, the Council of Europe proceeded on the fast track without taking on the economic portfolio. It developed in breadth rather than depth, shall we say, and focused on things like harmonizing legislation and providing a political forum in which to debate issues, with a focus on rule of law and human rights. On the other track was the European Coal and Steel Community, which really got down to the nitty-gritty, that is, how some of the economic assets of the continent were going to be managed. And that's the one that led to the European Union, which acquired the clout and the money and is the one we mostly talk about today.

Q: Did the delegates run for office, or how are they selected?

SILINS: The delegates to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe are chosen from their own parliaments. In other words, they're already elected to the parliaments of their own countries and are sent periodically to represent that country in Strasbourg.

Q: You were in Strasbourg from when to when?

SILINS: Well, I was there from '89 to, let's see, '91. The reason I hesitate is that I didn't complete my assignment to Strasbourg. I was asked in the fall of '91 to set up a new embassy in Riga.

Even before that, and I forget the exact date, in Strasbourg I got a phone call from the State Department asking if I would be interested in going to a Baltic capital, presumably Riga, although the location was still a little up in the air, to set up something that would be like a consulate general but that would represent the U.S. to all three Baltic States. Already back in Washington people were thinking the Baltic States might change their status. At the time we were represented to them only through Leningrad, a city in the USSR. Wouldn't it be nice to have representation in one of their capitals, separate from the consulate general in Leningrad? That would reinforce our policy of not recognizing their incorporation into the USSR. I said, yes, I would be interested, but how are you going to do this? The answer was, we plan to ask for Soviet permission to set up such a mission. I knew right away that the idea wasn't likely to fly. I mention it only because it does show that the thinking about the transformation of the USSR was beginning to evolve. The Swedes did set up such a consular mission in Riga and got a jump on the rest of the diplomatic community.

Q: Well, let's go back to the Council of Europe and all. What sort of a player was this in European unity?

SILINS: I think it was an important player in the early stages of grooming the former Soviet satellites for reintegration into Western Europe. They also reached out to Gorbachev, as I said. The East European countries that had been part of the Soviet bloc were invited to send guest delegations to Strasbourg and launch the process of becoming full fledged members of the Council of Europe. In doing so, the Council of Europe imposed requirements on them, including human rights and rule of law requirements that had an impact on how these countries evolved internally, because they could see now that they had to jump through certain hoops in order to be accepted back into Western Europe, which is where they wanted to be. So I would rate it as being quite important on the European stage, particularly with respect to harmonizing legislation and with the highlight on human rights issues, but as having almost no discernible impact in Washington.

Q: Did you find that there was an EU mafia that tended to be dismissive of it?

SILINS: Well, to some extent. They simply couldn't hold that many things in their minds at the same time. The European Community did exist, we knew it was important-God knows I would never deny that-and the Council of Europe looked like excess baggage that no one had much use for. So they gave me pretty much free rein to do what I wanted there. Considering how little the State Department cared, I was treated with amazing respect and consideration by the various officials in Strasbourg, as the equivalent of an ambassador from a member country. But the U.S. at that time was not only not a member country, we did not even have "official" observer status. We were simply represented by our consul general in Strasbourg.

Q: Where was the, well later it was the European Union but I guess your European Council, where was its parliament located?

SILINS: Well, here's just one of the many sources of confusion. The parliament of the Council of Europe met in Strasbourg. But so did the parliament of the European Community - part of the time. That's what we call the European Parliament. It would move back and forth. Half the time, it met in Strasbourg in the same building as the parliament of the Council of Europe until it eventually acquired its own building nearby.

Q: Okay, you're confusing me.

SILINS: I apologize, but this is just the beginning. The European Parliament would commute back and forth, at great expense, between Brussels and Strasbourg. For good measure, it also had administrative offices in Luxembourg. The commuting was largely at the insistence of France, which demanded equal time for Strasbourg. For further eye-blurring confusion, we could talk about why the similar-sounding Council of Europe, the European Council, and the Council of the European Union are really three different institutions. But perhaps we should go on to something else.

Q: Well, did you find Strasbourg important as a listening post?

SILINS: Very much so. You know, that's what really made it for me. I mentioned that the former Soviet satellite countries were sending delegations to Strasbourg and preparing for full membership. So it was a good place to meet parliamentary and government officials from all over Europe and keep tabs on the dawning of the post-Soviet era. Among the delegations with which I met was one that included the soon-to-be foreign minister of independent Latvia.

Now, I was slightly schizophrenic officially because part of my job was to represent U.S. interests in east-central France. In fact, it was a particularly pleasant part of my job. That part of France, Alsace-Lorraine, that whole corner of France, happens to be unusually pro-American. They just love the United States. That's where the design for the Statue of Liberty came from. They thought Americans were wonderful, the Americans came over to save them from the Germans, and they will go out of their way to be nice to us. And in fact they, that is, those French citizens living there, prevented the State Department from closing the Strasbourg consulate as part of its many and frequent attempts to trim its budget. The State Department had put Strasbourg on the hit list, but a delegation headed, I believe, by the mayor of Strasbourg went to Washington and lobbied - not the State Department, they're not that dumb, they went straight to the Congress. They told the Congress that this was a really bad idea, it would give the U.S. a black eye in France and don't do it. So Congress removed Strasbourg from the hit list.

Q: How did the French-German equation work out there? Now, this is some years, obviously, after the war, but how was this playing with them?

SILINS: I didn't notice any French-German tension. The local blend of French and German culture, cuisine and architecture seems to have settled into a very stable and attractive mix. It's a captivating part of France. There are still a lot of residents with German surnames and a local dialect survives that is basically a kind of German. At the same time, because of tourism and the fact that the Council of Europe, the European Parliament and their sister institutions regularly bring so many foreign officials to town, it also has a very international flavor. The French lean over backwards to maintain the French imprint, which is one reason, I think, why they absolutely insisted that the European Parliament meet there as well as in Brussels. But as far as tension between French and Germans, I never saw any of that. The Rhine flows right by Strasbourg, as you know, and there was busy traffic back and forth all the time. You could do that without having to present passports or documents and it was very free in both directions.

Q: How did the fall of the Berlin Wall, how did all that play when you heard about it?

SILINS: That whole period just before and after the fall of the wall and the Iron Curtain was just fascinating. Of course everyone in Europe was just agog about it. My own favorite memory is when my wife and I were on a weekend trip with our son Nico into the mountains not far from the German border and we saw these ... You've heard of the German car, the Trabant, which is basically a lawnmower with a car body? These little vehicles, looking timid and vulnerable, were just beginning to penetrate to the West. They were sort of tentatively and haltingly making their way, you know, because they had never, ever been allowed to go across the border and now they were making their first adventurous penetrations into Western Europe. It remains a touching image for me.

I also saw the dramatic physical difference that the fall of the Berlin Wall made. We visited Berlin, oh, roughly six months after the wall had come down. In some places the wall had been literally erased, taken away stone by stone. It was just gone. But what was not gone was the jarring and now inexplicable difference in the buildings on one side and the other of where the wall had stood; one side gray and tumbling down and in bad shape, the other side modern and flourishing. It was bizarre and very, very striking.

Q: Did this send any shockwaves through the Council of Europe or did their activity change?

SILINS: Their activity accelerated. I mentioned they had already been preparing for this. They were going to be, shall we say, the first port of call in Western Europe for government and parliamentary delegations from what had been previously part of the Soviet bloc. So they had already laid the groundwork. They had invited representatives to come to Strasbourg even before these countries were truly independent. They were not surprised, they were happy about the new opening, and they redoubled their efforts to show them how to bring their political systems, legislation and courts into harmony with Europe. The next step, of course, would be to pass them on to the big brother, the European Community, later the European Union, which would further integrate them into Europe.

Q: Were you getting any flavor of immigration to France from North Africa or had this really picked up by that time? Because, you know, today it's a real problem for the French.

SILINS: It was already a problem then. Even back then something was taking place that to this day I find absolutely stupefying that it's so routine in France, and that is the burning of cars as a means of public expression. This was already happening from time to time, actually, in Strasbourg. Groups mostly of North Africans would, for whatever reason, have a mini-riot and set fire to cars. And as we've seen, this has continued over the years and in Paris sometimes reaches massive proportions. It was already a problem.

Q: Did you see the French in the Strasbourg area trying to do anything about integration of these North Africans, and Africans, I guess too, or not?

SILINS: They weren't very successful at it. Part of the difficulty is that there is a sense in which the French simply pretend that the problem doesn't exist. That is, there's a great reluctance to do anything that we would call affirmative action because that would seem to imply that there are alternative civilizations within France, and they will not accept that. You are either French or you're not French and by God, if you're in France you're going to be French. And this may have acted as a brake on their ability to integrate people, at least those who are not inclined to integrate themselves. There are, of course, a lot of people of North African and Middle East background in France who threw themselves wholeheartedly into French culture. I remember being terribly amused one day; I was at the U.S. embassy in Paris, I was cashing a check, and the cashier was very obviously Lebanese. And she started complaining to me about how wasn't it a shame there were so many foreigners now in Paris, obviously thinking of herself as Parisian - that is, French. So she had just melted into that mentality. I sympathize; in a way I did that with the American mentality except it's not quite the same thing. Americans can also be something else; a French person is not really allowed to also be something else. There are not hyphenated Frenchmen, at least not yet.

Q: Why don't we stop at this point?

SILINS: Okay.

Q: And we'll pick this up when you have some free time with what happens after you left Strasbourg. How's that?

SILINS: That will be fine, yes.

Q: Today is the 24th of February 2009, with Ints Silins. Okay, where do you think we should start?

SILINS: Well, I think we were near the end of my assignment as consul general in Strasbourg, where I was looking partly at France but more at the Council of Europe and what it was doing about the reintegration of Europe. I think I mentioned that I had been asked if I'd be interested in setting up a consulate in Riga to cover the Baltic States, but that never really took root.

Q: You were saying why you didn't.

SILINS: Yes. I was told that the State Department said, well, you know, of course we'll have to get the Russians to approve this, and I knew that wasn't going to happen.

Q: I'm no expert but it wouldn't take a rocket science to figure it out.

SILINS: Right. But then, not so long ... Well, there was one other interesting event before the next step.

Q: Excuse me; what date are we talking about?

SILINS: We're now in the winter of '90 - '91. The Soviet Union is undergoing great transformation. Gorbachev has set in motion a process that he ultimately will not be able to control; it's not clear where it's going but it's clear that a big change is coming. One of the catalysts of that change was what's now called the OSCE (the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe), then known as the CSCE. In November 1990 here was going to be a CSCE summit in Paris, which would also include East European representatives, and among them were going to be, for the first time, representatives of the Baltic States. I went to Paris to see this event take place and was actually rather horrified at what happened.

The chairman of the summit, because he was the president of the host country, was Franï¿½ois Mitterrand, and he therefore had the final word on how the procedures would evolve. Agreement had been reached before the conference that representatives of the Baltic States, which were at that point far from independent, were going to be allowed into the hall and would be seated as officially recognized representatives. At the last moment, and this happened before I actually reached Paris because I'd been delayed for some reason, possibly a snowstorm, about the time I was getting there what happened was this. The top leaders were seated at the front of the large room with Gorbachev next to Mitterrand. As Gorbachev looked out across the hall, he could see that there were representatives of the Baltic States. And he leaned over to Mitterrand and said, more or less, either they go or I go. I don't know precisely what he said, but essentially it was, either they're out of here or I am, and Mitterrand immediately caved in and had the Baltic delegations removed from the room.

I found that shocking, frankly, and disappointing. As did the evicted Baltic delegates, of course. As I say, their seating had already been negotiated in advance, and so Gorbachev was reneging on something that had already been decided. This episode suggested that when push came to shove, if the Russians said, we really are angry about something and we want it done this way, the CSCE would cave in. It caused CSCE stock to drop considerably in the Baltic States.

I mention the episode because it did continue to color my views of that organization during my time as ambassador to Latvia. I hasten to add that overall my view of the CSCE is favorable. I think it played a very positive role in helping to catalyze the internal transformation of the Soviet empire because of its Basket III, which opened a window for the West to encourage independent groups, human rights groups, some of which became very nationalist groups, that helped to bring about the transformation, indeed the collapse, of the Soviet empire. Its work certainly gave courage to the dissidents in the early years.

Q: Just to get a feel for the time, I mean, obviously the United States was sort of unique in that we had never recognized the Soviet swallowing of the Baltic States. This goes back to the ...

SILINS: World War II.

Q: World War II. But what about other countries, the European countries? How stood they on this issue? Let's bring it up to '89.

SILINS: There was a lot of variation in the degree to which they resisted recognizing the incorporation of the Baltic States. The majority of them did not officially recognize it. That is, they did not recognize it de jure but almost everybody recognized it de facto, as a fait accompli. They treated the property of the formerly independent Baltic States, for example their diplomatic missions, as now essentially the property of the Soviet Union. This became an issue after the Baltic States regained their independence, because of course they tried to regain possession of their former buildings in order to set up new embassies.

We were the leader of the pack on Baltic policy in the West. If we had, as we were sometimes tempted to do... if we had decided that non-recognition policy was outdated and going to lead nowhere, I think it would have collapsed globally, and everyone would both de facto and de jure have recognized the incorporation of the Baltic States. So really the Baltic States owe their independence to a considerable extent to the steadiness of American policy.

Q: What about, particularly, the French and Germans and British? Had they put any qualifications on how they stood with these states or not?

SILINS: Of those three, the Germans of course were the ones most intimately involved in the Baltic area, but in a way of which they could not be proud. And that's because Hitler had sold, literally sold the Baltic States to the Soviet Union. That was the purpose of the secret annex to the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact of August 1939, where for sums of money, of gold, territory was ceded by the Germans, who controlled it, to the Russians. Many people see that as a precipitating cause of the Second World War; it secured Germany's eastern flank and allowed Hitler to attack Poland and then launch his western campaign. So the Germans were not ... They felt they didn't have the moral standing, shall we say, to take the lead in disputing the Soviet annexation. An awkward situation for them, so they tended to stay in the background on this issue.

The Brits were more solid, more in line with American policy. The French were more pragmatic in adapting their policy to other interests, so they were pretty strong de facto recognizers of the annexation of the Baltic States.

Q: None of the major powers had completely bowed to the Soviet Union. I mean, there was always sort of a qualification there, would you say?

SILINS: That's quite true. As I say, because of American steadfastness we did not recognize it and so they fell into line. While the Western powers did not try to violate Soviet rules on contacts with the Baltic States, the policy of non-recognition preserved the possibility, I mean the reality, that the Baltic States were in a different category from the other republics of the Soviet Union.

Q: Did the Swedes or Finns have any role in this at that time?

SILINS: I think I touched on this previously, in the context of my time at the embassy in Stockholm. The Swedes assumed a disappointingly low profile on this subject despite the fact that Olof Palme, who was prime minister, had a strong personal Baltic connection. His mother was a Baltic German and I understand that he used to spend summers in Latvia as a boy. Perhaps because of the intensity of Swedish opposition to U.S. policy in Vietnam, the Swedes leaned toward the notion that, well, maybe Soviet policy isn't all that attractive, but look, the Americans are just as unattractive and therefore we're not going to be crusaders against the Soviet Union on behalf of something the Americans support. In retrospect, though, my feeling is that the main motivation was pragmatic. The USSR was a powerful neighbor, bristling with arms and with a demonstrated readiness to impose its views by force. Knowing how strongly Moscow felt about holding on to the Baltic States, Sweden was willing to let that issue lie. So pragmatic considerations trumped principle.

Q: Well, at this CSCE conference, what were you doing?

SILINS: I had no official role or status. I went up to Paris because of my own interest in Baltic issues, because Baltic representatives for the first time were to be allowed into a high-level CSCE meeting. It was not unusual for me to go to Paris from Strasbourg; I did that all the time. But I had no official role; I went up there because I wanted to talk to some of the Baltic representatives.

Q: You had experience looking at it both from Leningrad and Stockholm. Were you able to talk to the Baltic representatives there, and what were you seeing? Were they on their way, was this your feeling, or was the role of the Soviets so problematic that it was dubious?

SILINS: The independence of the Baltic States was still up in the air. Even today, any person with knowledge of Baltic history realizes that nothing is for sure in that area. On the one hand, Baltic residents felt that momentum toward independence was accelerating. But from the Soviet point of view ... Gorbachev at this time apparently still believed that the Baltic States could be a sort of laboratory for testing ideas to rejuvenate the Soviet Union. I think that's how he thought of them, as a valuable part of the USSR. Because of their past history and ties with the West, because of their small size, because of their reputation for a high degree of education and industrial productivity, they could be used as a test bed to experiment with techniques that might then be expanded on a broader scale to rejuvenate the entire Soviet Union. He entirely missed, misunderstood, failed to grasp, the strength of national feeling in the Baltic States. Maybe even today he's still puzzled about why the Balts show so little gratitude for what the Soviets tried to do for them. That point of view is shared by a lot of Russians who, to this day, regard the Balts as ungrateful pests who during the Soviet era enjoyed a standard of living higher than the average for the USSR. Many Russians apparently are convinced that the Balts benefited from their relationship with the Soviet Union. They cannot imagine that from the Baltic perspective their half century inside the USSR was a long, painful period when economic, political and social development was smothered by the Russian occupation. Many Balts feel confident that if they had remained independent, their economies would have kept pace with, say, those of Denmark or Finland or Sweden. Instead, upon finally regaining their independence, they found themselves far poorer than any EU members.

Q: Well then, then moving on, when did you leave Strasbourg and what did you do?

SILINS: In the fall of '91, Bob Frasure, Darryl Johnson and I assembled in Copenhagen at the request of the State Department to begin laying plans for the establishment of diplomatic missions in Estonia, Lithuania and Latvia. The United States had formally recognized them as independent countries at the beginning of September 1991. Our mission was going to be to open up embassies in Tallinn, Vilnius and Riga. Bob went to Tallinn, Darryl to Vilnius and I went to Riga. We went first on a TDY (temporary duty) basis, and then were designated as chargï¿½s in early October.

Our first job was to find locations for these new embassies.... Well, that's not quite accurate. Our principal goal was to establish a diplomatic beachhead and begin to help these fragile new governments cope with the scary set of economic, political and security problems that faced them. But simply putting together the rudiments of a diplomatic mission absorbed much of our energy in the first weeks. In Riga, I led a small group of officers, sent on a TDY basis from the State Department, operating out of the fifth floor of a small downtown hotel, the Ridzene. Our communication with Washington was by the Inmarsat system, with a satellite dish set up on a window ledge. I slept in a room down the hall. So the U.S. embassy was at first a hotel room, and pretty much the same thing happened in the other two Baltic capitals.

Q: What had happened at this point when you were there? I mean, what was the situation?

SILINS: We reached this point only after the U.S. Government recognized Baltic independence and opened diplomatic relations with Baltic countries. We were far from the first to do so; Iceland was the first. We were way down the line, I forget the exact number, something like 27th, 30th or something. The reason for that was the policy of President Bush, that is, the elder George Bush, his policy of prudence vis-ï¿½-vis the Soviet Union. I think I've mentioned this in a previous context. He did not wish to move so rapidly into this very sensitive part of the former Soviet Union as to provoke a Soviet counter-reaction. He wanted to move slowly and carefully so as not to jeopardize Baltic independence or Soviet stability. That's why we didn't rush in to be the first to recognize. Our slow pace was held against us, and maybe to this day still is, by some Baltic citizens, but I think it was a wise and certainly a defensible policy.

Q: Well, this is to avoid what they call triumphalism.

SILINS: Right.

Q: And it makes sense. Besides, we didn't really have to because we already had Riga.

SILINS: Right.

Q: You know. So I mean, this is, you know, just straightening the deck chairs.

SILINS: Well, that calls up the image of the Titanic. Let's not go down that road.

Q: You're right. But anyway ...

SILINS: Right. No, that's quite true. We knew that, as I said, we were responsible for holding open the possibility of independence for the Baltic States over all these decades. So, no reason to shout about it. We just wanted to go in there and get the job done... and there was, of course, a lot to get done.

Q: Okay, you were given Latvia, is that...?

SILINS: Right.

Q: Was this a joint effort where the three teams were doing it all together, or did you each go to a place and do your work?

SILINS: We met initially to coordinate the basic policy and organize the practical work, decide how we would communicate with the State Department, whom we would report to. Our first job was simply the physical task, the administrative task of setting up these facilities, of establishing a place to work, assigning responsibilities and getting this job done. We operated separately from each other but we met periodically, typically in a Nordic capital and then on a rotational basis in Riga, Tallinn and Vilnius once our embassies were functioning. The idea was to share experiences, share ideas - what worked, what didn't work - because we were basically all operating to the same, dare I say, cookie cutter mold as far as actually setting up the embassy went. And here you probably sense a beef coming.

At this time James Baker was secretary of state and he had apparently decided that he was going to open all these new embassies - and I'm talking about not just the three Baltic States but also the many former Soviet republics that quickly peeled off from Mother Russia - without any new money.

Q: That's one of those horrible mistakes. I mean, it sounded like sort of a political gimmick with no real value at all outside of ...

SILINS: Well, it caused a lot of stress. I think it was silly and irresponsible. We could have redistributed funds from some other government agencies that had an excess, for example the Department of Defense. After all, the Cold War was now more or less over and you might think there would be a peace dividend, but for some reason Baker essentially said, well, we'll just open... whatever it came to, something over a dozen new embassies... without any new funding. And it caused staffing shortages. For example, Embassy Riga never had a general services officer during my time as ambassador, which in retrospect I find hilarious. To actually, you know, to start off in a hotel and be looking for a building and then reconfigure a building into an embassy, starting absolutely from scratch and having to select, hire and train local staff without a GSO was just ludicrous. I also didn't have a permanent administrative officer much of the time, so I was dependent on temporary officers, TDYers, which of course caused problems of continuity. So I had to devote more time than I could spare to overseeing the administrative activities of getting an embassy located, renovated, staffed up.

Q: What was the situation on the ground where you were working?

SILINS: The situation in late 1990 and early 1991 had been turbulent and threatening. When we arrived in September 1991 there were still barricades in downtown Riga left over from that period, when there had been a sort of abortive coup attempt. Lots of Russians were appalled at the idea of Russia losing the Baltic States. Within the USSR itself there was a conservative backlash against the direction Gorbachev was taking, and in late 1990 there were rumors there might be a coup in Russia followed by a dictatorship. In fact, Soviet Foreign Minister Shevardnadze resigned in December 1990, warning that "dictatorship is coming." A right-wing coup in Moscow would almost certainly have led sooner or later to an attempt to seize back Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. The skeleton of an alternative Soviet-loyalist government - a "Committee of National Salvation" - had been formed in Latvia, and in January of '91 Soviet special forces, the OMON, were briefly unleashed. There was some gunfire in downtown Riga. One of their targets was the Latvian interior ministry building, which is across a narrow street from the Hotel Ridzene, which became the U.S. Embassy. Some people were shot in the park across the street. There was also shooting inside the hotel itself. Jim Kenney, who later became my Public Affairs Officer, happened to be in the building at the time, on a visit from Embassy Moscow. There were still, when I was living there, bullet holes in the glass that lined the staircase leading up to the second floor from the lobby.

So the situation was volatile. Many Russians were clearly reluctant to relinquish the Baltic States. They considered them to be a signature acquisition of Peter the Great. They considered that the territory had been bought with Russian blood, that this relationship went back hundreds of years. There is also in Russia a certain lack of appreciation and respect for small nations. Many Russians are disinclined to take them seriously. Some Russians even felt that way about the Swedes, I found. I remember when I told one of my Russian friends in Leningrad that my next diplomatic assignment was going to be in Sweden, he looked baffled and said, "Why would you want to go to such a small country?" And he was an anti-authoritarian painter.

Then, too, Latvia had become sort of a Palm Beach for retired KGB, Soviet military and people with reactionary views about Russia and Russian history and what Russia ought to be doing in that region. And so, with the continuing presence of tens of thousands of disgruntled and unpaid Soviet troops and the horrific economic collapse that followed Latvia's separation from the Soviet Union... yes, the situation was still volatile.

Q: Well, was there the feeling that this thing might not hold?

SILINS: Yes, there was that feeling. For part of the time I kept a journal, a sort of personal diary that reflects some of my thoughts and feelings at the time. I didn't start it until early '93, as I recall, and even at that late date my very first entry, I remember, reflects a feeling that, oh my God, here comes another round of really strong Russian pressure. Russia was launching attacks on the Baltic States at the United Nations and dragging its feet on troop withdrawals and I remember thinking, you know, this still is not a sure thing, this is not a done deal, there's a long way to go, we need to have a strong U.S. presence here to keep it moving forward.

We also had to work on the Latvian side to make sure that those many Latvians who felt a sense of national outrage at what had been done to them by Russia, that they not overreact. Many of them, for example, didn't want to reach a signed agreement on the withdrawal of Soviet forces. They felt that it would imply recognition and even legal acceptance of the Soviet annexation, and we had to talk them out of that. We felt that it was very important for future stability that there be a clear, signed agreement that provided for the staged withdrawal of Soviet forces and the removal of the strategic anti-missile radar site - a "Hen House" radar - based at Skrunda in Latvia.

So it was still a very touchy time. And then, of course, the economy went wholly, completely to pot with an inflation rate that reached 1,000 percent in 1992.

Q: Well, whom did you deal with when you got there? Was there a government in place?

SILINS: There was a government. What the Latvians and Estonians and Lithuanians did initially was to adapt the elected structures from the Soviet period, the Supreme Soviets, and turn them into representatives of independent governments until sovereign constitutions and parliaments could be set up. So at first we were dealing with people who had been elected under the Soviet era but who had shown a clear intent to make their country independent.

Q: I would think these people would be so tainted that the general population wouldn't accept them.

SILINS: Actually, that turned out not to be the case. And it proved possible to have an orderly transition. In Latvia it worked out better than in some countries with which I am familiar - Romania, for example. In Romania the old gang clung to power even after they shot Ceausescu and his wife, so the Romanian public, rightly, remained suspicious of them and their goals for a long time. In Latvia it was less the case. There were still groups in Latvia, of course, that showed reluctance to support Latvian independence, mostly ethnic Russians who wanted to retain a strong link to Moscow. Those, of course, roused some apprehensions, but it probably helped that they were represented in the parliament because at least they weren't driven underground.

Perhaps most important, though, is one key pragmatic consideration: things were going to pot in Russia even faster than in Latvia. In other words, many Russians in Latvia could see that they were better off in Latvia than in Russia, certainly for the short term, and that Latvia was likely to get a lot more help economically, relatively speaking, from the major West European countries and the United States. I think that knowledge kept even nationalist Russians in Latvia from soiling their own nests, so to speak. I mean, they didn't want to leave Latvia for Russia because they would be worse off there, and they didn't want to cause too much of a fuss in Latvia because that would just jeopardize their own situation, both political and economic. After all, if they consolidated their position in Latvia, they would eventually be in a position to benefit from Latvia's growing links to the West. The net result was a fairly orderly evolution toward a solid majority of people who wanted Latvia and the other Baltic States to remain independent.

Q: You were wearing two hats. One is just the plain administrative hat, which would be enough to overwhelm anyone of trying to set up an embassy. But the other hat was... you're the American representative there, and how were you playing this? I mean, what were you trying to do?

SILINS: Let's focus first on the fact that I myself was born in Latvia but now here I was, representing the U.S. That was a delicate issue, and I dealt with it as best I could. I'm not sure, in retrospect, if I did that as well as I might have. I probably overdid the "I am now American" side of things.

Q: Well, this often... you have to draw the line.

SILINS: Yes.

Q: You're not one of us, I mean, you...

SILINS: Right. I did that not just to avoid confusing people about whom I was representing but because one of my first messages, and it was not always welcome, to the new representatives of the Latvian government was: people, don't count on the West to solve all your problems. You are going to have to solve your basic problems yourself. Don't just wait for aid; organize, figure out your own solutions to your problems because that really is the only way it's going to work. And one of the reasons why I stressed this message was my experience in Haiti. Now, this may sound like a strange connection, but it was in Haiti that I conceived a really profound skepticism about the efficacy of foreign assistance to countries.

Of course Haiti has its own particular problems. I also remember, of course, that the Marshall Plan seemed to work pretty darned well in Europe - but Latvia wasn't like postwar France or Germany. Latvia had a different set of problems to solve that we in the West couldn't necessarily provide the best answers to. And waiting for help from others can breed passivity. So I stressed self-help.

I also perhaps didn't work as hard as I should have in reviving my own ability to communicate in Latvian. I was able to speak fair Latvian, but normally in my official meetings I spoke English. I wanted to convince Latvian officials that they better learn English fast. I think that was the correct message, and the fact that many of them did learn English quickly was a great plus. It made it a lot easier for them to deal with the West.

Q: Well, did you speak "teenage Latvian" anyway or not?

SILINS: I spoke pretty good kitchen Latvian. I'm generally fairly gifted at languages up to a point. Latvian was my first language so pronunciation was not a problem. But Latvian is a highly inflected language with a complex grammar, and I had quite consciously switched to English when I was very young. To this day I don't feel comfortable addressing a difficult subject off the cuff in Latvian.

Q: Were you, and maybe your European counterparts, were you also telling the Latvian Latvians: don't go after the Russians here on your soil; you've got to learn to live together?

SILINS: Yes, we were preaching a lot about this. As I mentioned, lots of Latvians felt deeply aggrieved by the Russians, who had annexed their country, killed or driven out huge numbers of their countrymen, hijacked their economy, cut them off from the West, and of course imposed the Russian language on them. As I recall from my own calculations, Latvia experienced something like a net gain of 800,000 ethnic Russians, or Russian speakers, after Latvia was annexed by the Soviet Union. For a small country of two-and-half million people, that's an immense number, about a third of the population. That would be like the United States having involuntarily to absorb 80 million Mexicans over a period of several decades - if Mexico were a country with a population of over two billion that had occupied and annexed the U.S.

Latvians were almost reduced to a minority population by the time they regained independence. So there was a vocal minority of Latvians calling for mass repatriation of Russians. The U.S. Government, and other Western governments, didn't see any workable way of repatriating hundreds of thousands or even tens of thousands of Russians, particularly to a Russia that was, like Latvia, in economic chaos. So that idea had to be shelved, and we were successful in doing that. From the other side, to this day you hear from Moscow accusations that Latvia does not give a fair shake to its Russian residents. But the CSCE has investigated those claims year in, year out, and has not found them persuasive.

Q: Were there any particular types of Soviet troops there that caused a problem?

SILINS: The only serious violence that took place was the shootings that I mentioned in January of '91 by the OMON, the Special Forces-type guys. But that was a brief skirmish, thank God, and ...

Q: That was over a radio tower, wasn't it?

SILINS: I think the famous tower you may have in mind was in Vilnius, actually, in Lithuania. In Latvia the OMON holed up in what became the interior ministry building, opposite what became the American embassy in downtown Riga.

In Latvia, aside from the public anxiety provoked by the presence of tens of thousands of underpaid and poorly disciplined Soviet troops, a serious problem was... well, let's call it vandalism. It was vandalism directed mostly, in fact almost entirely, at facilities that the Soviet troops occupied or used, military facilities. When they left them, as they did over time, they really stripped them. They took out the wiring, the windows, doorknobs, plumbing fixtures... anything you could think of to sell or re-use. Sometimes there was simply malicious vandalism. I need not dwell, I think, on the details, but a historic building near the university in downtown Riga that had been used as an officers club was left in a very messy condition. The Soviet Navy, which was present in force in the city of Liepaja, started stripping their ships of brass fittings and so forth, actually causing many of them to sink at their berths, a pathetic sight.

Another kind of mess was from fuel. There was a lot of fuel leakage around their fuel dumps. Apparently they took the word "fuel dump" literally. I remember as ambassador going to a place near a former Soviet airfield where an American company was trying to clean up the soil. They had drilled a pipe into the ground and showed me that what they were pumping up was basically pure jet fuel, which had been allowed to leak from a pipe that connected the storage tanks with refueling pumps at the airfield. And I should mention, of course, the explosives. There were target ranges with unexploded munitions and ammo dumps and other things that had to be cleaned up. So it was a big, expensive mess whose extent, I confess, shocked me.

Q: We're talking now on the beautiful campus of the Foreign Service Institute but this had been a military base for 50 years. It was not a major facility but the fact that they had a motor pool here meant there were leaks. And so they had to, you know, pull all the soil up around here and aerate it or something before they could put it back in. If we're bad I can imagine the Soviets would be much worse.

SILINS: Yes. I think they took it to new heights or depths.

Q: What was your impression of the Latvians that you were dealing with at the time? Were they hard-headed pragmatists or idealists; I mean, what were you getting from them?

SILINS: There was quite a spectrum across the leadership group. One of the most effective leaders, because he was calm and reassuring during a tense period, was a person who falls under the category we were just discussing, of former Soviet officials. Anatolijs Gorbunovs had held a very high position in the Latvian communist party, and so you might think that he was a poor choice to be the acting head of the new transition government, but that wasn't true. He was able to deal well with Russians; they knew him, he knew them. He was able to deal well with Latvians; although his name may sound Russian he was considered to be 100 percent Latvian. He was able to deal quite well with Westerners, too, although I don't think his English skills ever developed to a high point. But he was an excellent choice to smooth over that transition period.

When a fresh government was elected, the first prime minister was a former physicist, Ivars Godmanis, who in fact until just recently was again prime minister of Latvia. He resigned [20 February 2009] when the government collapsed over the new round of economic difficulties there. He made a good first Latvian prime minister for reasons sort of opposite to those that made Gorbunovs an appropriate leader for his time. Godmanis was untainted by any previous association with the communist party, at least in any official capacity. As a scientist he was more or less insulated from that. He was very smart, as physicists often are. He had strong analytical skills; he could size up a problem and figure out how to attack it. He had been active in the independence movement so he had credibility with the more nationalist groups among Latvians. I believe he was very effective in getting Latvia through an extremely difficult time, but he took the rap for it. As is often the case, even if someone succeeds in getting you through a hard time, what you remember is the hard time and not the getting through. Poor Godmanis, when the next round of elections came, his party didn't even get into the parliament, so in effect he was dumped for his pains.

Q: How did things work for you? You say you weren't a chargï¿½ at first, you were just kind of there, and then what happened?

SILINS: The process was this. All three of us who were going to be nominated as ambassadors were first sent out TDY [on temporary duty]. This is very unusual; normally you have confirmation hearings with the Senate Foreign Relations committee and agrï¿½ment is requested from the government to which you will be accredited. In this case, in order to accelerate the process, we were sent out, first of all, to set up the missions, then we were nominated by the State Department. After going through the usual clearance process, we were all, I think, confirmed by the Senate at about the same time. In my case that was in late March of '92. After my confirmation hearing, I flew back to Strasbourg to join my wife Elizabeth. We loaded up our station wagon with essential items, including our yellow Labrador Brio, and in April drove from Strasbourg to Riga by way of stops in Prague and Warsaw. That was the basic drill: first on TDY to open up the missions, then back to Washington, get nominated, go through the Senate confirmation process and some training, and then out in the spring of '92 as designated ambassadors.

Q: I would think that you would find yourself with members of the Latvian exile community who had been in the United States maybe for their whole lives breathing down your neck, who had political clout, who wanted to get in there and start doing things.

SILINS: You mean who would like to be ambassador?

Q: Either ambassador or just sort of come in and sort of take over.

SILINS: Well no, I didn't really find that. Although some American Latvians were a bit frustrated at what they perceived as the slow pace of the Bush Administration in setting up embassies, recognizing the Baltic States, and so forth, I think in general they were quite satisfied with what the U.S. Government was doing. The fact that I was an ethnic Latvian and a career diplomat with highly relevant experience made it hard for any members of the U.S. Latvian community to say, well, wait a minute, we want a real Latvian in there. I'm not aware of anyone who was jockeying for my position. We did have quite a number of ethnic Latvians who in fact went out there, some of them before I did, certainly before I arrived as ambassador, who wanted to help, to do something on all kinds of fronts, either to help form a new government or some of the early entrepreneurs to get in on the ground floor and start building up business in Latvia. So yes, there was a wave of returnees to the Baltic States, in particular to Lithuania, which is the largest country and which had the largest pool of residents in the U.S. to draw from.

Q: How did you find working there as ambassador? I mean, were you part of, you might say, a Western team of ambassadors?

SILINS: Definitely, yes. There was a tightly knit and closely communicating team of Western ambassadors. We generally met at the residence or embassy of whoever was the dean of the corps, that is, the longest serving member. To start off, it was the German ambassador, Hagen Graf Lambsdorff, whose family has a long Baltic/Russian connection. Toward the end of my tour I became the informal head. All the NATO- and EC-member ambassadors were part of the team. We consulted with each other all the time because we felt that we faced common problems, common issues. Even before the embassies as such were open there was close consultation with other Western governments and in particular the Nordic countries. Sweden played a lead role vis-ï¿½-vis Latvia.

I may have mentioned that I brought a group of Latvian parliamentarians to Washington for consultations in, I believe, early '94 because some political parties were still stubbornly resisting the idea of signing an agreement with the Soviet Union about troop withdrawal. I escorted the delegation, which represented all the political parties in the Latvian parliament, to reassuring conversations with top U.S. government officials, including President Clinton and Vice President Gore. We then took them to the residence of the Swedish ambassador in Washington for more talks with their European counterparts. I believe that to an important extent it was the Swedes who helped persuade them that holding out was not a wise position, that an agreement with Russia was the best way to go.

Q: What about dealing with... I guess when you first arrived it was still the Soviet ambassador, wasn't it?

SILINS: The Soviet Union folded at the end of 1991, so for almost all of my time as ambassador there was also a Russian ambassador, that is, a representative of the Russian Federation, Aleksandr Rannikh. I found it easy to have a good relationship with him because he didn't have the mentality of a typical Soviet career official. If I remember correctly, he had risen through the ranks, having started off as an interpreter and spent a lot of time in Finland. I didn't deal with him much on substance. Key Latvian-Russian issues, and the key one was really Russian troop withdrawals, he and I did not address bilaterally. Those were handled at the highest level in Washington and Moscow, ultimately at the presidential level.

Rannikh and I talked sometimes in an informal way about relations in Latvia between Russians and Latvians. I took it upon myself to try to change his thinking about how to look at the history of Latvia and Latvia's relationship with Russia. I thought perhaps he might suffer from the same warped perspective that a lot of Russians do, because that's what their history textbooks teach them - that the Baltic States had joined the USSR voluntarily and benefited from the relationship. I found, to my pleasure, that possibly because of the time he spent in Finland he knew where I was coming from, understood the history better than lots of people in his own foreign ministry, but really wasn't, he said, in a position to do much about it. There are some anecdotes about this in a short journal that I kept sporadically while in Riga, parts of which have been published in various formats. One version of it is in a book published in English by the University of Latvia in 2008, Latvia and the USA: From Captive Nation to Strategic Partner.

Q: Is your journal in such a form that we could just meld it into this transcript?

SILINS: Yes, let's consider that.

Q: Why don't we just add it as an adjunct? I mean, this of course would be extremely valuable and it will also be available through the Library of Congress and it would fit into the whole thing.

SILINS: I think that's a good idea. I'll add it at the end of the interview.

Q: Well, how were relations between the Baltic countries? I mean, I assume they all had their own grievances.

SILINS: That's a very good question. I think there was an expectation in Washington that, well, these countries have suffered similar fates and so they'll want to work closely together in molding their futures. Of course, it doesn't always work out that way. They were a bit like hostages who after they're released do not necessarily want to spend all their time together. They want to go off in their own directions.

Q: And we always lump them together.

SILINS: We do, we do. Because it's hard, really, to keep track; for a non-specialist it's hard even to remember which is which. And so yes, there was this automatic pressure to treat them as more or less identical, which they of course resented. And of course it's also true that they're in some sense natural competitors, you know. In some ways they are good at the same things and therefore compete at those things.

Ultimately I think it worked out pretty well because they're also pretty realistic, these countries, and they realized that they do have to work together. Probably the strongest force keeping them, shall we say, in line, was their desire for membership in two organizations, the European Union and NATO. The reminder that they should not be too unruly or seen to be uncooperative was most effective when it was in the context of a path toward membership in the EU or NATO, and that proved to be effective.

Q: Where did Kaliningrad fit into this? Because that's an old Soviet name... I think of it as Kï¿½nigsberg.

SILINS: It was.

Q: And where did that fit in?

SILINS: Well, Kaliningrad is an as yet undigested remnant of the old Soviet empire. I find it hard to imagine that it will persist indefinitely in its detached state. You're right; it was called Kï¿½nigsberg. That's where Immanuel Kant, the most famous philosopher, lived a very orderly life. It became essentially a Soviet military base after World War II. The remnants of its past were largely annihilated but Moscow wanted, indeed insisted on holding on to it as an integral part of the Russian Federation, and so one of the more complicated aspects of dealing with the newly independent status of the Baltic States was working out access for Russia to Kaliningrad; resupply and visa questions and transit issues and so forth. It's enveloped by Lithuania and there's no direct contact with Latvia, so we watched it from a distance.

Q: Was there a sense, in Latvia, that the people you were dealing with were taking a very close look at what was happening in Russia at the time? I mean, you know, ready for a resurgence or what have you?

SILINS: Absolutely, yes. Latvians were very, very keenly attuned to what was going on in Russia, as were the Russians in Latvia, of whom there were, you know, hundreds of thousands. Of course, early in the Soviet era, before the U.S. entered into diplomatic relations with Moscow after the Bolshevik Revolution, for us Latvia was of interest primarily as an observation post, a window looking into Russia. That's why George Kennan went to Riga, not to pay much attention to Latvia but to see what he could learn about what was going on in communist Russia. To this day, everyone who has anything to do with Latvia realizes that if the situation evolves in an unfavorable direction in Russia, it's likely to impact very negatively very quickly on Latvia. So they're interested not just in political developments but in economic ones. One of the hopes for prosperity in Latvia was as a transit country for Russia. That is, goods would be shipped from Russia to the West through Latvia and from the West to Russia through Latvia. That's how it used to make a lot of its money back in the Middle Ages. Bad relations with Russia would immediately be reflected by slow transit times across the Latvian-Russian border, and that unfortunately is true to this day. That border remains an unpredictable and difficult place to get across.

Q: Was oil or natural gas an issue while you were there?

SILINS: Both are to this day. Oil was pumped by Russia across Latvia to the port of Ventspils and then shipped from there to the West. That pipeline became, first of all, a source of a lot of money in Latvia because Latvia would collect transshipment fees. It then turned into a point of tension, because the Russians felt the fees being charged were too high. The Russians also wanted to develop a purely nationally controlled exit point for oil and petroleum products closer to St. Petersburg, so they eventually cut the Latvian pipeline off. For years the oil pipeline across Latvia, to my understanding, has not been used, although some oil continues to flow from Russia to Ventspils in freight cars, which is much more expensive and cumbersome.

As for natural gas, it is Latvia's main source of heating fuel in the winter, and Latvia is entirely dependent on Russia for it. Latvia is blessed with huge underground storage facilities, natural caverns that can be used to store natural gas. So it had a buffer of sorts, luckily, because Russia several times stopped the flow of natural gas to Latvia, over disputes about the price or to make a political point.

Q: How about Poland? Was Poland a factor?

SILINS: Poland was, I think, a big factor vis-ï¿½-vis Lithuania, with both positive and negative overtones because of the tangled history of the two countries. If my memory is correct, what is now Lithuania's capital, Vilnius, was not part of Lithuania during Lithuania's first modern appearance as an independent state; it lay in territory annexed by Poland in the 1920's, much to Lithuania's outrage. So Lithuania actually gained a sizeable stretch of territory when it was occupied by the USSR, because Moscow reattached the missing bit, which was retained when Lithuania became independent again. On the other hand, farther back is a more positive and equally intimate historical link between Lithuania and Poland. They were, in effect, joint managers of a serious empire, the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth or Union, which for about two centuries stretched from the Baltic to the Black Sea. Memories of that period of grandeur form an important part of Lithuania's cultural and psychological heritage. So I suspect Poland looms large on the Lithuanian mental horizon, but I can't say that Poland was a strong player in Latvia.

Q: How about Finland, Sweden?

SILINS: Yes. Both were very important, particularly, as I mentioned, Sweden. Sweden was first on the ground with a diplomatic post in Latvia, in Riga, headed by a very talented young man named Lars Fredï¿½n, who knew everybody and everything and was a great help to the other newcomer ambassadors reporting in from Western countries. I had an advantage in that I'd been there before, spoke the language and so forth, but I still always found him valuable to talk to.

Sweden also became effective as an advisor to the new Latvian government on questions like, how does a parliamentary system work, that sort of thing, and also in terms of economic aid and in encouraging Swedish businessmen set up shop in Latvia.

Q: Did Finland play any role at all?

SILINS: Finland played a very, very active role in Estonia, even more active there proportionately than Sweden was in Latvia, and that's because really the Estonians and the Finns are close cousins, virtually brothers. The languages are very similar. They actually can understand each other, which is not true, for example, of Latvians and Lithuanians. The languages are related but I really can't just sit down and have a conversation with a Lithuanian, whereas Estonians were able to watch Finnish television, even during the Soviet era. Because they're very, very close, Finns used to come either by boat or by train to Estonia, driven in part by the desire for cheap vodka, but that turned into a very serious business connection when Estonia became independent. Now Finland plays a leading role in Estonia, to the extent that some Estonians proclaim their country a Nordic rather than a Baltic one.

Q: I had a little taste of the American non-governmental organization relationship with the Stans. I went out for three weeks to Kyrgyzstan to talk to the government on a USIA grant about setting up a consular service. And I was astounded at the NGO people. I mean, some very good and some, I would say, dubious and then also the missionary movement. But there was a tremendous flow to the East from the United States of various organizations giving economic advice, converting to Christianity, anything you could think about. How did you find dealing with this and how did it work for you?

SILINS: There was quite a lot of that in Latvia. In general I would say that the most active NGOs tended to be Latvian-American or Latvian-Australian or what have you, organizations that in general played a very positive role. Some of their members came over and worked not just as representatives of that organization but joined the government, went into business or became an integral part of Latvian society. Latvia, like the other two Baltic countries, made it possible for the offspring of former Latvian citizens to reclaim their citizenship. You didn't necessarily have to be born in Latvia to come back and get your passport. If, for example, your parents were born in Latvia and they had left the country because the Soviets occupied it after the Second World War, you could get your passport. Quite a number of people did that, and once they did that they could integrate into the local scene. Further helping the process along was the Latvian government's decision to restore property rights to the descendants of citizens whose lands and buildings had been nationalized by the Soviets.

There were also non-ethnic Westerners of all different types and some of them were helpful and some were not. When the situation stabilized and people in the West could see that Latvia was going to make it as an independent country, we began to have quite a lot of evangelicals coming and, in my opinion, not always playing a terribly positive role. They were responding to what they thought of as a suppressed demand for religion, and it was true that that was the case. I mean, the Soviets had very strongly discouraged religion but the varieties being offered by some of these proselytizers were not always, I think, the best. Sometimes they preyed on weakness rather than providing a source of strength.

Q: What about the church there? Was there a Latvian Orthodox Church?

SILINS: Latvia had a broad representation of religious groups. It was the most cosmopolitan of all of the Baltic capitals for hundreds of years and had churches of many denominations for centuries. So what you had represented there were Jews, Russian Orthodox, you had Lutherans, Catholics; pretty much anything you wanted, suppressed of course during the Soviet era but with the remnants still there. I think of Latvians as predominantly Lutheran, but Catholics are also very numerous and of course there is a strong contingent of Russian Orthodox.

At the same time Latvians are, let's say, more like Swedes with respect to religion than the Lithuanians. Lithuania had an ardent Catholic tradition that persisted during the Soviet era, and the underground church, or even the acknowledged, the official church played an active role in, let's call them Lithuanian national issues; that is, they kept alive the notion of Lithuania as a potentially independent entity. As the Catholic Church in Poland, for example, was very active in the underground nationalist movement all through the Soviet era. Latvians are a little bit more, shall we say, standoffish vis-ï¿½-vis religion, with of course lots and lots of exceptions, but they tend more toward the secular than their Lithuanian neighbors. That's also true, I think, of Estonians. But that's not to say that the churches did not play an important role; they certainly did, and they continue to do that to this day. And churches of course were among the first organizations to establish links with the West as quickly as they could.

Q: Was there a representative of the European Community when you were there?

SILINS: Yes, there was, and they started the highly technical talks, negotiations really, of paving the way for Latvia and of course the other Baltic States to become full-fledged members of the EC and then the EU. And that was the arduous process of digesting the, what's the French term for it? Not the fait accompli... The acquis communautaire - what's already been legislated and adopted by the member states. They had to, in effect, adopt en masse all the legislation that the EC as a group had already taken on board. Just the translation was an awesome job of work, to say nothing of putting it through the national legislative mill. So that was a busy track and very important for the future of the country, but taking place mostly in technical channels, setting the stage for full-fledged membership. Now the EC was very important but not typically much heard from publicly. Their representatives assiduously avoided speaking out on internal political issues. That was not their game and so they were not much heard from in the local media.

Q: What about NATO? You were there from when to when?

SILINS: From the fall of '91 until the summer of '95, so a pretty broad span.

Q: So this was a long period. Was it sort of understood from the beginning that these countries would be absorbed into NATO or not?

SILINS: No, not at all. It wasn't a sure thing, and I think many Russians to this day are aghast that the Baltic States were absorbed into NATO. In fact, Gorbachev may even believe that he was given the promise that they would not be. No, it was contentious right from the start for obvious reasons. This is territory that the Russians considered an integral part of their nation and suddenly it's going to be absorbed into a military organization whose founding purpose was to oppose Russia by military force! So yes, it was a contentious issue because at the time the remnants of Soviet forces are still inside these states. So there was a lot of debate about it, not just between the West and Russia but within U.S. policy circles, the public. People argued that it would be provocative to Russia, that there was no need for it; that after all, since the Cold War was over, why on earth would we want to not only perpetuate but actually expand an organization whose raison d'ï¿½tre seemed to be behind it? So there was a lot of debate about that.

Q: Well, you're a Russia hand. My understanding is that, you know, sort of the zeitgeist of the Russia hands was let's not...

SILINS: We don't need this.

Q: We don't need this, you know, because this would upset Russia. How did you feel about this and how did this play sort of internally with you?

SILINS: I have to say on this issue that I can't claim to have been an important player because I always had very mixed feelings about it. I cannot claim, do not claim to have been an ardent advocate of Baltic NATO membership; at the same time, if you asked, on balance, which side was I more for, it would be NATO membership, no question about that. The main justification really was this, in my mind: you couldn't leave them out. If we left them out they would become a kind of a gray area, a zone of instability, basically. That was the bottom line. In fact, I could see no way around that argument. As long as NATO exists and as long as NATO operates on the principle that any European country willing to accept its rules and voluntarily asking to join it would be admitted, then I don't see how you could keep them out. Because if we told them no, then what we're saying, no matter what we want to say or think we're saying, what we are saying to the Russians is, you guys have a say about what happens in the zone; it's basically your backyard, and you can have a perhaps even controlling influence on what happens here. And I did not think we should be doing that.

Q: Yes, I have to say I agree with you. It is also troubling.

When you arrived, did the Latvians talk NATO right from the beginning?

SILINS: Not exactly. In the very early days, the main military issue was not "NATO in" but "Warsaw Pact out." That was the focus, how to get the remnants of the Soviet military structure out of the Baltic States. Most Latvians, as I recall at the time, had the good sense not to be too vociferous in public about seeking NATO membership while this issue remained unresolved. But there was little doubt about where their sentiments lay, and most of the active political leaders made it clear early in the game that their two major goals were NATO membership and membership of the European Union. That's how they thought they would ensure the security and prosperity of their country.

Q: Was there a Latvian military?

SILINS: That's a good question. There was not really a Latvian military, no. That was one of the big problems and it took a lot of our time and attention to solve it.

Latvians, of course, had served in the Soviet military, but the officers produced by that experience, most of us felt, were not the best guides to setting up a new independent Latvian military. The Soviet military system is notorious for its defects, in particular the way it treats its recruits. Hazing was vicious and apparently still persists in the Russian military. They lacked an effective NCO (non-commissioned officer) system, which is the heart of the American military. I mean, the NCOs - the smart, tough, experienced career soldiers - are really what make our army the best in the world. The Soviets didn't have anything comparable to that; it was a very top-down approach, plus, of course, all the political indoctrination that goes with Soviet military training. There were a few veterans of that Soviet experience that surfaced as potential organizers of a new independent Latvian military, but we didn't think that that would work out too well.

What we did was to turn to our National Guard structure as a starting point because we thought the first priority was not some sort of, you know, special forces type operation for Latvia but a National Guard type of structure that would be the most relevant to Baltic security needs. And to do that, and I think this was a good choice, we forged links between state National Guard units in the United States and the Baltic States. In the case of Latvia, Michigan was the state that came to mind. It happens there are a number of Latvians in Michigan, and the Michigan National Guard really rose to the occasion. They began in a very low key way in helping the Latvians with the basics. We also were able to get some former U.S. military officers to come as advisors. One of them, a Latvian-American, actually became a minister of defense in Latvia. And so that was the route we took to rebuilding the military.

Q: I can see the National Guard makes good sense because in a way, at least to start off, the National Guard has a role of protecting internal order, disaster relief, this type of thing, which is what you would want; a small country, it's not going to be there to stand off the Russian army. It's mainly an internal guard.

SILINS: Right. But it was not easy to attract young Latvians into the military. There was a lingering antipathy toward military service because of the bitter Soviet experience. You know, lots of Latvians were sent off to Afghanistan by the Soviets. And of course the pay was terrible and the facilities had just been vandalized by the Russians, so it was tough sledding to start with.

I have to praise the Latvian leadership for seeing right from the start, though, that they had to aim beyond just the National Guard approach. They had taken on board very early the lesson that if you're want to join NATO you have to be, in the rather inelegant phrase, not just a consumer of security but also a producer of security. Meaning that you can't just say okay, I'm in, now protect me, but you also have to offer some services, some contribution of your own. The Baltic States understood this right from the start, and so small though they were, that's why they signed on, this of course much later, when the U.S. went into Afghanistan and to a lesser extent they helped with Iraq. In the earlier era, before Afghanistan and Iraq, they were preparing their soldiers to act as observers in troubled areas, wherever they might be, in Africa or the Middle East, what have you.

Q: And Bosnia, was this..?

SILINS: Yes, that sort of thing. And I think that was very wise, they realized that they needed that kind of training and that kind of experience, so they could say, when someone asked them, well why should we help you out? Well, because we can do this, this and this and we have done so.

Q: Yes. Did you get involved in the early development of that?

SILINS: Well sure, as ambassador at a small embassy I was involved to some extent with everything. I worked with the National Guard and kept their morale up and made sure that link was working well. I visited their training sites, talked to the Latvian military establishment to make sure they understood the importance of what was going on and that they appreciated it in the long run.

Q: I would think there would be a tremendous problem of trying to change a military to, you know, to reflect the NATO way of doing things rather than the Soviet system of officers dumping on the enlisted men. I would think it would be very wrenching to change that. I mean, how does this work?

SILINS: Well, you do it step by step and you do it by taking people to the U.S. for training, for example, so that you get them totally out of the Soviet environment and show them in person how it works in the West, put them into the context. So we sent quite a lot of people at various levels, from West Point on down, for training in the U.S., both long term and short term, and brought in sizeable numbers of National Guard people to convey in a more dramatic sense how the mentality actually operates.

One of the things that we used the National Guard for was not just military training but really as exemplars, as role models. They would do volunteer projects. You know, there was so much that needed to be done all through Latvia that there was no lack of possibilities. For example, if there were a school near where they were based, on weekends they would form a team and go fix things up or paint up a classroom, stuff like that, to get the concept of volunteerism going, which was not widely accepted in Latvia except in the sense of something that's directed from above and, you know, you have to do it because the party tells you to.

Q: Well, did you have to work to develop a real party system or did the Latvian system fall into parties almost naturally?

SILINS: You're talking about political structure?

Q: Right. You know, conservative, liberal or whatever you want to call it.

SILINS: Like most countries, Latvia does not tend toward a tidy two-party system. The U.S. is rather unusual in this respect. When Latvia was independent between the two World Wars, it developed an excess of political parties. I think at one point it had something like 40 political parties, which is, to say the least, too many for a small country. It has a tendency toward political fragmentation.

Initially, though, in 1991 and 1992, perhaps the main factor was the unpleasant memory of the rigid and oppressive Communist Party, which gave the whole notion of political party membership a bad name and made people reluctant to throw themselves into political organizational work. The first Latvian governments were formed by groupings that were not really political parties, more like national task forces. The first was the broadly based Popular Front, whose main unifying goal was the restoration of Latvia's independence. That goal was achieved, but when Latvia's economy crashed after being cut off from the Soviet infrastructure in which it had been embedded, the Popular Front crashed with it. It did not win a single seat in the Latvian parliament, the Saeima, in the 1993 election. This despite having won about 75% of the vote in the 1990 election!

Next at bat was a coalition called "Latvia's Way." It was also called "The Best of the East and the West" because it comprised, on the one hand, people who had grown up under the Soviet system in Latvia, and on the other hand, Latvians who had spent much of their lives in the West and who brought to the table an entirely different experience. But by now there were more than 20 registered political parties in Latvia. "Latvia's Way" only won about a third of the votes and had to join with the Farmers Union to form a government. So a pattern was set whereby there would be broad, fairly reliable support for basic goals like independence, free markets, rule of law, membership in NATO and the EU, but with a proliferation of small parties squabbling about the details of policy implementation and the sharing of assets. Coalition governments, often hanging by a thread, became the order of the day.

I suppose this was inevitable because Latvian society is quite heterogeneous and still in flux. You know, political parties reflect the societies out of which they spring. If you have a fragmented society, then you're going to have a fragmented political system. You also have, in Latvia, a tendency to think of a political party as sort of like a church - you know, either it meets all your needs or you're not going to join it at all. A reluctance to compromise on issues. So that creates a strong pressure for small parties representing a narrow range of interests, and that doesn't work well on the national scene. What the answer to that is I really am not sure.

Q: Did you have a reflection of what developed into the Russian mafia? I mean, the criminal element. Did that spill over into Latvia at all?

SILINS: To some extent, yes. In the early stages we had a few economic assassinations, killings that were clearly the product of struggle between organized crime groups. Luckily that didn't last long. Then organized crime took a different form. It spilled into politics in a way that was only quasi illegal. It took the form that the World Bank calls "state capture." That is, more or less legal business groups buying influence from parliamentarians and in effect buying legislation or controlling candidates to political office. And that still remains a problem in Latvia today, as it does throughout much of the world, including the U.S.

Q: The Clinton Administration when it came in was focused rather heavily on the economy. Was there a change from Bush I Administration to the Clinton Administration?

SILINS: As regards policy toward Latvia I would say, no. It was sort of ironic. When Reagan was succeeded by the first President Bush, there seemed to be more of a change as regards policy toward the Soviet Union, even though they were from the same political party, than in the transition from Bush, who was a Republican, to Clinton, a Democrat, vis-ï¿½-vis Baltic policy. In part, I think that was because the National Security Council staff, as I recall, remained largely the same, so the professionals working the problem showed a lot of continuity. Also the Latvian-Americans and other Baltic-Americans remained very active on Capitol Hill and throughout Washington, keeping the Baltic story in front of political leaders and the public.

At that time the Baltic States were still seen as interesting and got quite a lot of press. You know, their fate was not yet a fully resolved problem. People still saw them as, not exactly cliffhangers, but exciting success stories. The underdog who makes it. The Three Mice Who Roared. Americans love that kind of story. So I think, Clinton, he's politically very smart, he knows how to read a situation. He knew that this was the kind of thing it was important to remain on the right side of. So I found no problem at all, really, no threat of change of policy, and indeed Bill Clinton was the first sitting president to visit the Baltic States in person.

Q: How did that visit go?

SILINS: Very well. It was really a visit to all three Baltic leaders, not just Latvia. They were all assembled in Riga, the Baltic heads of state, and met with him. Clinton's stay in Riga was very short but packed with a lot of ceremony, such as a mass gathering at the foot of Latvia's Freedom Monument, that was meant to convey a strong, positive public impression. It was as much a message, I think, to Moscow as it was to the local population, a sign that the U.S. cares at the very highest level about the fate of these countries, is willing to show the president's own personal interest and engagement with them. And in that respect I think it was highly successful. Not least, the weather was brilliant, beautiful. Elizabeth escorted Hillary, my son Nicholas squired Chelsea, and a good time was had by all.

Q: Did you have a feeling that we were continually, during this period, laying down markers, that we care about this, and these countries are going to stay this way, this is not something that is interesting but will go away?

SILINS: Definitely.

Q: Staking out territory, in a way.

SILINS: Yes. Well, we hoped it was staking out territory, not in the sense that we're staking our claim to it, but that these are independent countries, they are an integral part of the West, part of Western Europe, part of the Transatlantic Alliance, and that while we did not mean to use them to threaten Russia, we would not look kindly on attempts to meddle with their basic rights.

Q: Did the Russian Fleet play any role or was it more concerned about glowing at night or something like that?

SILINS: Well, I recall one of my journal entries from the spring of '93. The Soviet Fleet, now the Russian Fleet, which had moved out of Liepaja and was now operating out of nearby Kaliningrad, engaged in threatening war games off the coast of Latvia. So there was gesturing also from the other side, as if to say: No, we are not gone yet, we still think of the Baltic as our lake and we feel that we have a right to dictate what might affect the security of this region. There was signaling going both ways.

Q: Well Ints, is there anything else we should talk about concerning this Latvian period that you can think of?

SILINS: There is a lot we haven't touched on but maybe we can cover some of it in the next phase. After I left Latvia I spent two years at the University of Chicago, and one of my activities there was a Baltic conference that covered some of these issues. And of course there is more material about my time in Latvia in the journal that I will attach to this interview.

Here I might just add that the fate of the Baltic States gains added interest and importance, as former Swedish prime minister Carl Bildt pointed out, because they serve as a litmus test of Russian policy. That is, how Russia deals with them, particularly now that they are in the EU, is a very good indicator of how Russia sees its relationship with all of Western Europe. It reveals the Russian hand. If Russia acts as though it has the right to dictate to these near neighbors, what they call their "near abroad," then that suggests that they're likely to deal in a similar manner, if they can get away with it, with other West European countries. If they're inclined to cut off natural gas supplies to Latvia because they're angry at Latvia for some political reason, then they might cut off the gas supply to Germany if they are angry at Germans. So the Baltic area, I think, has an ability to shed light on larger issues.

Q: Okay. Well, we'll talk about all that next time. Great.

Q: Okay, today is 16th of March, 2009, with Ints Silins. This is a reprise because our first session of a few minutes ago didn't seem to be recording, so let's hope this works.

Okay, Ints, we're going to pick up on talking about some final thoughts about your time in Latvia, and you were talking about the relationship of the ambassador to the Washington establishment.

SILINS: Right. It was my experience, and I think it's not an atypical one, that I as ambassador wasn't used as effectively as I might have been, in the sense that issues seemed to gravitate more toward Washington-based high level officials, either by phone or personal visit. This has been pretty much the rule since the era of fast communications and the Kissinger global junkets, in which I participated when I served on the Executive Secretariat. More and more, the "normal" way to handle big foreign-policy questions became to have someone from Washington do it. The result is that foreign countries don't take ambassadors as seriously as they might, because ambassadors are not identified with the resolution of top-level issues. There's no need, I think, to cite any particular examples of this...

Q: But you might cite the one in New York.

SILINS: Yes, well, when President Clinton had a meeting with the three Baltic presidents in New York in September 1993, he did not invite his own ambassadors to those countries to sit in. I was in New York at the time to give a talk to the Council on Foreign Relations and to meet with George Kennan, and I did sit in on another meeting with Latvian President Ulmanis in New York, but none of the three U.S. Baltic ambassadors was in the meeting with President Clinton. If I were one of those Baltic presidents, I could only conclude that the three U.S. ambassadors seemed not to enjoy ready access to Clinton, so they may not be an integral part of the top-level foreign policy process.

From the point of view of U.S. interests, implicitly downgrading your ambassadors is not a constructive way to use your foreign policy tools. Many issues arise that are important but lack the towering urgency needed to get them onto the desk of the president or the secretary of state. Those issues have to be resolved, and the logical person to do that would be the ambassador. But if his influence has been undercut by being left out at key moments, it becomes harder for him to accomplish that.

I don't want to exaggerate here; I did not feel that I was an insignificant part of the apparatus. And of course it's also up to the ambassador to establish his credentials as a serious player in foreign policy. I just think that ambassadors could be used more effectively by the U.S. rather than trying to do so much out of Washington.

Q: Well also, you know, it's true in so many countries where the ambassadors understand its culture, I mean... The prime example always is dealing with, you might say, Arab kings or with the Japanese. When high level people come out, they go in with a request or something and they come back and the report is oh, we'll certainly think that over, and the ambassador or somebody will say, you know, that wasn't a good meeting; he said no. I mean, this happens again and again. If you know the culture, one sees an opening or something that somebody who's flying in from Washington doesn't really understand.

SILINS: Right. I think the issue is more acute with countries that are in a position to do us real harm if they are misinterpreted and mishandled. Latvia was not such a case, fairly obviously; Latvia is quite dependent on the U.S., grateful to the U.S. for saving it from becoming a permanent part of Russia, and therefore was going to listen to me no matter how I was treated by the president and the secretary of state. But it's a general issue that merits consideration in some other forum.

Q: Well, by the way, we're including in this... you did essentially a diary would you say, or a journal?

SILINS: I call it a journal. It was sporadic and I didn't begin it until May of '93 when I'd already been ambassador for some time, almost a year and a half. It's not meant to be a comprehensive record of my official activities, it has some personal stuff in there. But what it does convey, I think, is some of the feeling, the atmosphere of the time, which was still a highly volatile period. There were still barricades up when I arrived in Riga, the economy was tanking, the inflation rate hit 1,000 percent. It's easy to forget these things; it's easy to forget how threatening some high-level Russian statements were at that time, and some of that is in the journal and it might be of interest.

Q: All right. I don't know if I've asked you, but something I've never understood: what do you do in a country when the inflation rate is 1,000 percent? I go back to Yugoslavia where the dinar was about 25 cents to the dollar. I've seen a bill for half a trillion dinars. Now, what the hell do you do?

SILINS: The recent poster child, of course, is Zimbabwe, where the exchange rate just went out of sight. In Latvia, blessedly, that period did not last very long. It was handled, first of all, by issuing a transitional currency, the Latvian ruble, to replace the Russian ruble. Then, when conditions were judged right, luckily not much later, a Latvian currency called the lat, or lats in Latvian, was launched. To general surprise, it appreciated steadily against the dollar and became one of the most stable currencies in the Western World. It was first loosely tied to an IMF basket of currencies, then to the euro, and it has maintained its value steadily, year in, year out, until the present day. Now, because the Latvian economy like all other economies is having a setback, it has been threatened by rumors of devaluation, but it has not weakened and it has been a very safe place to keep your money.

But your question was, what do you do when you have that inflation rate? You do a lot less shopping and you do more bartering. You rely more on your own resources, you eat your own garden products. You share things and swap things until the problem goes away. The main impact was that everybody's savings were wiped out, so it was everybody scrubbing the board clean and starting all over. And that was devastating for pensioners and others without income who were looking to their savings to get them through the tough times.

Q: Well then, you left Latvia when?

SILINS: I left Latvia... Well, I've never left it in the sense that I keep going back for prolonged stays, but as ambassador I left it in the summer of '95.

Q: What did you do in '95? I mean, what did you go back to?

SILINS: Something extremely interesting and pleasant, an assignment as diplomat in residence at the University of Chicago. It's a top-notch academic institution, a great school, and the apartment we found in Hyde Park was within walking distance from where Elizabeth grew up. And she got a job at the university's School of Social Service Administration. So the assignment was great for both of us. My main job was to recruit for the Foreign Service, to talk to university students, not just at the University of Chicago and other schools in the city but throughout the area -universities in Illinois, Minnesota, Wisconsin, Michigan. So I did that. And I also taught a mini-course and some seminars during the two years we spent in Chicago.

But one big project during the first academic year was unexpected. Shortly after we arrived in Hyde Park, I was contacted by a young man named John Papp from the CIA, not the covert side but the overt analytical side. He asked if I would be willing to help organize and chair a major international conference on the Baltic States. You can probably guess from the mixed feelings I've expressed about the role of the intelligence services in U.S. foreign policy that I felt some hesitation at being the front man for something that was going to be financed primarily by the Agency.

But as I thought it over, it seemed to me there was a need for this conference. Remember, this is only the fall of 1995 and the Baltic States are very far from being integrated into Europe. They didn't join NATO and the EU until 2004, almost a decade later. At this point they're still reeling from a half century of Soviet occupation, it's not clear how long it will take them to modernize and Westernize, and there is no consensus yet on whether it makes sense for them to be brought into NATO. Even EU membership is not in the bag yet. I thought it was important to maintain a high policy profile for the Baltic States. I was afraid that now that they had regained their independence, U.S. policy interest would flag, and the Balts still needed it. So I went ahead. I was able to get some additional funding from DOD and turned the conference into a four-way cooperation between the CIA, the Pentagon, the State Department and the University of Chicago, where my base was the Harris School of Graduate Public Policy Studies.

Q: What was the conference about?

SILINS: It had a terrible title, Nation-Building in the Baltic States: Progress and Prospects for Reform. Practically coma-inducing. We probably should have incorporated the Baltic Tigers image, or the Mice that Roared, or The Tiny Titans that Toppled the Soviet Empire. On the other hand, we were not trying to appeal to a broad public. It was invitational - our goal was to assemble 60 to 80 of top officials, academics and other experts to swap ideas on the most important problems that would have to be solved in order to integrate these countries into the West - economic and political reforms, security relations, ethnic relations, dealing with organized crime, and so forth. Since everybody attending was well informed, the discussion took place at a high level of sophistication. We also did an analysis of economic development using the Agency's Factions methodology, which is a way of gaming policy dynamics.

As you may know, Chicago is a major center of Lithuanian settlement in the U.S., so we had especially good representation from the Lithuanian side, including former President Landsbergis and two future presidents, Valdas Adamkus and, if I remember correctly, Dalia Grybauskaite. Toomas Ilves, who became president of Estonia, was also there. Jack Matlock, former U.S. ambassador to the Soviet Union, gave the keynote speech. This mixture of top experts made for fruitful networking during the conference and was probably its main contribution.

Q: How did you get around the fact that it was being sponsored in part by the CIA and the Department of Defense? I mean, in olden days that would have been the kiss of death.

SILINS: And it would have been, I think, for many groups. But the Baltic States, as I mentioned before, feel obligated to the U.S., and not just to soft power. They are counting on American hard power to back their independence, so they and their supporters are less squeamish about intelligence issues and military connections. The fact that I was the front man and the honorary chairman may have helped a bit. Whatever the case, attendance was high and CIA sponsorship did not torpedo the conference.

Q: How was Russia portrayed? Was it the menace to the East or was it seen as possibly a partner or what?

SILINS: No, it wasn't portrayed as a menace but it certainly was portrayed as a potential problem. To do otherwise would be to be an idiot, frankly.

Q: Yes. You know, other than that, how was the play, Mrs. Lincoln? Yes.

SILINS: It's a problem. I mean "problem" in the neutral sense, not in the pejorative sense. Russia's a problem not only in that it's a big neighbor that has invaded in the past but it is also the home country of hundreds of thousands of people who now live in the Baltic States, and the question of how to integrate them or deal with them is still a not entirely resolved question.

Q: Then, what was your impression of the students that you were meeting?

SILINS: Very high, frankly. Let's focus first on Chicago. Besides laying the groundwork for the Baltic conference, which didn't take place until early May of 1996, I did a couple of other things in that first year. One was something you could only do at a school like Chicago, where the students are very serious. I offered a not-for-credit mini-course in seven 90-minute sessions titled "Shultz at State: Inside U.S. Foreign Policy in the 1980's." My text was a book by George Shultz on his period as secretary of state.

Q: "Turmoil and Triumph."

SILINS: Right. Basically written by Charlie Hill, whom I knew very well from Vietnam and whom I invited to attend one of the sessions. It's a book well over 1,000 pages long, and I...

Q: I've read it.

SILINS: I read it in carefully marked sections and prepared one-page synopses and lists of issues for each session. The course was not for credit, so there was little motivation for students to attend a course with such a blockbuster text, but I had a good turnout. Students seemed to have read a good part of the assigned text and one of them came up to me after and said, you know, this is the most interesting thing that I've attended so far at this university. I appreciated that. In addition to Charlie Hill, who had been Shultz' personal assistant, I was also able to get Shultz' first deputy secretary, Ken Dam, who by some twist of fate was teaching right next door at the law school, to be the main presenter for one session. It was indeed an insiders' view of the foreign policy process, as advertised.

Shultz compared being Secretary of State to drinking from a fire hose, and that is what my mini-course must have seemed like, even though the focus was not on events but on the foreign policy process itself - on the way that the legal authority and political power to make foreign policy is dispersed throughout government and society, from the president and other members of the executive branch to Congress to interest groups and lobbyists. As we know, even within the executive branch there is often feuding, for example among State, Defense and the NSC. Often physical proximity to the President is decisive, so the NSC advisor has an edge. With all these hands grabbing for the ball, prospects for a consistent, comprehensive foreign policy are vanishingly small. As a solution, I toyed with the idea of shrinking the government and giving every cabinet member an office in the Executive Office Building next to the White House, but of course feuding within the executive branch is not the only problem.

With our current government structure, about the only time our foreign policy is consistent over time is when a powerful interest group takes it over. If our Cuba policy is any guide, consistency is not always a good thing.

Anyway, I also met with students at around ten or fifteen universities in the region during my two years in Chicago, mostly during recruitment visits. Those from the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor and the University of Wisconsin at Madison were probably the brightest and most promising with respect to their interest in the Foreign Service.

Q: During the '70s and all there was sort of a disdain for working for the government as a carryover from Vietnam. How was it at your time? Did you get any feel for that?

SILINS: When I was invited to speak about working for the State Department, usually the turnout was very high, almost surprisingly high, with practically full auditoriums at Madison, for example, where apparently there is a strong tradition of overseas public service, including the Peace Corps. I found a high level of interest almost everywhere and can't recall even one example where I got a hostile '60s -style questioning or a repudiation of the Foreign Service. But how many of those kids actually then applied to join the Foreign Service, I really can't say.

Q: No, but the idea is, you were getting a positive, at least...

SILINS: I was.

Q:...response.

SILINS: Yes, almost without exception, positive interest.

Q: Being at Chicago, and of course this is in the heartland of the Baltic migration to the United States in the early part of the century, did you get involved at all in various Baltic American groups?

SILINS: I did, yes. I did talk regularly to Baltic American groups. Lithuanians, of course, are by far the most populous segment of the Baltic community in Chicago. I spoke at the Chicago Council on Foreign Relations, I met with newspaper people and probably did more public speaking than I've done in any other assignment, and I enjoyed that once I got into the swing of it.

Q: Did you find, for example, these groups, were they replicating sort of the Cuban Americans and Irish Americans, being, you know, more Catholic than the pope? I mean, sort of over-zealous about their former nationality and all, or not?

SILINS: Now remember, we're in a different stage of the ballgame with the Baltic Americans. Their home countries have regained independence, so they're no longer in a state of panic about their very survival. The countries were not yet in NATO, but they were on a firmer track to join the European Union. So the sense of panic had receded. This kind of existential panic, panic about national survival, I believe is part of the reason why, for example, those who really care about Israel sometimes exceed reasonable bounds. They feel that their country is encircled by intensely hostile enemies, and that's obviously true, and therefore Israel's very existence is threatened. This brings out reactions that can be extreme and even counterproductive.

To find anything resembling that sort of attitude in the Baltic community you have to go back a few years, when it looked as though it really might be the end for the Balts as separate peoples, with the Latvians and the Estonians facing the greatest threat. In the case of Latvia, the percentage of population that was ethnically Latvian was sinking toward the 50 percent level and threatened to go below it, which would make Latvians a minority in their own country. And they felt, you know, this would be the end of their identity, the story's over. And that caused some hyper reactions, for example the conviction that any move by the U.S. that might even conceivably threaten the non-recognition policy must be stopped at all costs. So some Latvian Americans opposed any contacts with Latvia. They argued those would have to be mediated through the KGB and therefore would serve the purpose of the enemy, and they didn't want any contacts with officials in Latvia because that might imply U.S. recognition of Latvia's incorporation into the Soviet Union. So I met up with a bit of that in those days, in the pre-independence era. But it never really got to foaming at the mouth, the Baltic extremism, as far as I know.

Q: Well then, after your diplomat in residence time, whither?

SILINS: Well, the day after my retirement at the end of September 1997, I was on a jet headed for Belgrade. This was not a part of Europe to which I had previously been drawn, but the Department had asked me to join an OSCE team of election observers to monitor the presidential election in Montenegro. After reading books like Rebecca West's "Black Lamb and Grey Falcon," it was hard to say no. And the trip more than met my expectations. Montenegro had not been damaged very much by the Balkan warfare that broke out after the breakup of Yugoslavia, and it boasts spectacular landscapes and a fascinating population, so the trip whetted my interest. Not much later, EUR/RPM asked me to sign on as the deputy OSCE representative in Croatia. It looked as though my focus was going to shift from the Baltics to the Balkans. But after hanging fire for a month or two, the assignment to Croatia fell through.

As I was wondering what to do next, my aunt in Latvia died. This may not seem like a life-changing event, but it pulled me back to Latvia at a time when in family terms things were at a decisive stage. I may have mentioned that when Latvia regained independence, it adopted a policy of returning land and buildings that had been nationalized by the Soviets to the former owners and their descendants. As a result, my mother and my aunt had been given back what had been my maternal grandparents' farm. It covered about 30 hectares, or 75 acres, and lay 25 miles east of Riga in the town of Ogre.

I had kept hands off the process when I was ambassador and even afterward, so management of the property had fallen to Aunt Margita, who was too old to move to America and not in good health. Indeed, our main reason for getting the property back was to create a source of income for her in her old age. Her death made me the co-owner. As I looked into things after the funeral, it became clear that the property would go down the drain unless I hired a new manager and spent time in Latvia to put things back in order. I should mention that it was no longer just farmland but was now part of a town of about 30,000, of which about a fifth lived on our land in high-rise buildings which we did not own. That complicated the management picture considerably.

So beginning in about 1998, Elizabeth and I started spending almost half the year in Latvia, with her enjoying it even more than I did. She started teaching English as a second language and acquired a devoted following of students. I became involved with a number of non-profit activities. For example, I helped to found an anti-corruption organization called Delna, which is the Latvian chapter of Transparency International, the global anti-corruption organization. I also joined Rotary International through the newly founded Rotary club in Ogre. I then worked at building bridges between the Ogre club and Rotary clubs in the Washington D.C. area, starting with the Alexandria Rotary Club, as I went back and forth between Latvia and the U.S. That led to support for the hospital in Ogre and other Rotary projects.

So I've been doing mostly pro bono work, including through the U.S. Baltic Foundation, on whose board I have served for a number of years. We've recently launched something we call "The Baltic Good Governance Initiative," which is meant to support Baltic non-profit organizations that promote integrity in government and fight against corruption.

Q: It's called Delna, does that stand for anything?

SILINS: Delna in Latvian means the palm of your hand. It refers to a Latvian saying that means it's plain as the nose on your face, as open as the palm of your hand.

Q: Yes, openness; Glasnost. I have to be a little careful about that or what we call transparency.

SILINS: Right, transparency. That's the core issue that we support, transparency; transparency in government, transparency in business. God knows, as we look around the financial carnage around us, if there had been more transparency we would have had less carnage, no question about that. If anything, I am more energized now in this direction because it is clear that there is a role for non-profits as a countervailing force to help mitigate these kinds of problems. We have seen in the U.S. that government regulators did not do the job; and I would argue, frankly, that because of potential conflicts of interest and other mechanisms that lead to corruption, regulators cannot do the job alone. Just as you cannot have a neighborhood that is peaceful, law abiding and orderly just through the police. If the residents are unruly, don't trust each other and are habitually violent, there is no way the police alone can handle that problem. You have to have forces within the community itself in order to make it obey the rule of law and make it orderly. Just force from the outside alone cannot do it, no question.

Q: One of the things I've seen as I've been doing these oral histories now for almost 24 years is that there's been several trends. One of course is just the gender mix, more and more women in the Foreign Service. It's a much fairer organization. Also the minorities are coming in. I mean, that sort of thing. But something that I think has been overlooked but has happened is that when we both were in the Foreign Service originally, non-governmental organizations were looked upon as being sort of do-gooders and not very helpful.

SILINS: Yes.

Q: Today the non-governmental organization has become a major instrument, and the influence has been for the good; I mean, with some problems, but basically for the good, and I think the State Department and the Foreign Service has learned to live with them. I'm sure you found this true in Latvia, didn't you?

SILINS: Yes. Well, I mean I'm generally for non-governmental organizations, but it's not really a question of whether you're for them or against them; they are a reality. They are a part of the domestic policy scene and the foreign policy scene and by no means are they all benign. I mean, there are some that are radical and narrow-minded and there are others that are less so. It's all part of a... well, in the shall we say scientific sense, a chaotic process which then one has to try to regulate and channel in a constructive direction. I certainly wouldn't endorse any group simply because it's a non-governmental one; you have to weigh them one by one.

Q: Which brings us to something we were talking about in the beginning, and I think it's important to capture a period of time, and we're talking now in March 2009 and there's been... it's really a Washington issue, but the Charles Freeman, Chas Freeman episode, which has got both of us enraged. I was wondering if you would put it in... what the issue is and then we can talk a little about it.

SILINS: Yes. I was indeed very upset about what happened to Chas Freeman, even though I certainly can't call him a close friend. I did meet him fairly early in my career; I forget, I think it was in the Vietnam context, but I haven't seen him since... I think the last time was probably around 1993, this is a long time ago now, when he was at the Pentagon as OSD/ISA, assistant secretary of defense for international security; I was ambassador to Latvia at the time. Just recently he had been picked by the new director for national intelligence to head the National Intelligence Council.

Q: This is in 2009.

SILINS: Right. We're not talking about just him.

Q: Either February or March.

SILINS: Yes. This is not an appointment which is subject to Senate confirmation; it's not a policy-making position. The job of the chairman of the NIC, as I understand it, is simply to try to bring some order into the product, the intelligence output of the, what, I think roughly 16 intelligence agencies that the U.S. is now blessed with. It's a job that I think Freeman would be excellently suited for because he is a brilliant guy with a wide-ranging mind and he is willing to entertain a broad range of ideas. But the news of the appointment was leaked, and there ensued, mostly under the radar through the Internet, through blogs and e-mails, sharp, hostile I would say, opposition to him for a number of reasons. I think it's clear the main reason was that it was thought by some that he might entertain some change in U.S. policy toward Israel, which has been under the Bush Administration a policy of almost 100 percent support. I think, like many people, and Freeman has said this publicly a number of times, it seems clear that this policy is not working. What's needed is to step back, look at it, look at all of its elements, and see if there is some other way that we can more successfully guarantee Israel's security in a way that advances regional stability. But apparently even the notion that some change might take place in U.S. policy is enough to arouse a firestorm, and that's exactly what happened. Support, I'm sad to say, was elicited from people like Nancy Pelosi, speaker of the House. There was, I would call it a vicious editorial in The Washington Post that surprised the heck out of me...

Q: Which is what, about two or three days ago?

SILINS: It was on March the 12th. Actually March the 12th, I'm embarrassed to say, is the first day that I was even made aware of this whole thing. On March the 12th there were three items in The Washington Post. As I say, I'm not close to Chas Freeman and I'm not in the thick of foreign policy debate, but on March the 12th The Washington Post, on the front page, printed a pretty neutral account of the episode. It was by now already over; Freeman had withdrawn his name from consideration. Nevertheless, on the Op Ed page there was a supportive piece, a piece supporting Freeman as being just the right guy for the job and a man of integrity, written by Dave Broder, the dean of political commentators. I happen to know him, but from way, way back when I worked at the old "Washington Star." This is a very long time ago. But on the negative side was that hostile editorial on the editorial page itself.

Q: Well the editorial was, I found so out of... almost a completely different style than a normal editorial. It seemed to be almost frantic. I mean, it sounded odd.

SILINS: Yes.

Q: And I mean, I happen to be an admirer of Chas Freeman in that I did an oral history with him and obviously I was dealing with a genius. Now, he may be wrong on some things but basically he had probably the most objective mind and organized mind of anybody I have ever interviewed.

SILINS: I'm sure that Chas Freeman is wrong on some things, as who isn't? There is no one who is not wrong about some things. But he is brilliant; he has a broad understanding of the kinds of issues that would be involved in trying to bring some useful order to an intelligence output. By the way, in addition to these other articles, there was yet another piece, on the 14th or 15th of March, in The Washington Post, by Mark Lowenthal, who had been deputy chairman of the National Intelligence Council. He wrote a piece saying, to my amazement, hey, wait a minute, this is not even worth having an argument about; this whole thing doesn't amount to a hill of beans. The whole intelligence process doesn't work... and then he gave various examples, which amazed me because it was just proof positive that the process needs to be fixed, and that's exactly what Chas Freeman would be the best able to do.

I agree with you about the tone. I seldom speak out on these issues, but I wrote a letter to the chairman of The Washington Post Company, Donald Graham, who is, I understand, actually personally in charge of editorial page content, and told him that it sounded like the ranting of a hyper-caffeinated neo con. I think that this is not just an issue of the character assassination of one of our most distinguished diplomats, but this is really a free speech issue, and it has to do with an attempt to impose a kind of political correctness on the foreign policy debate that only is going to lead to damage to U.S. interests. In other words, to prohibit the raising of certain issues without dire personal consequence, and I think that's just bullying. It's not just a moral issue but it leads to bad policy; it harms U.S. interests and I think also it is going to harm Israeli interests. We need a wider, freer debate on all of this, and the reason I am still upset about what was done to Chas Freeman is that he has been made a public sacrificial victim to intimidate anyone else who might be willing to speak up along the same lines as he has done. And I think that is inadmissible.

Q: Well, it rings a theme that runs through these oral histories, and that has been the almost constant attack on "Arabists" by what can only be described as the Israeli lobby, in that if you are an Arabist and reporting on the Arab view of things, not in support of, but reporting on the Arab side of the Israeli-Arab conflict that's gone since at least 1948 to the present, that if you are reporting accurately on the Arab side you therefore are anti-Semitic, and this has been a tool that has been used really since the '40s on the Foreign Service and this is just another iteration of this whole thing.

SILINS: Well, I'm not an expert on the Middle East. I've never served there and I... although I must say I did study it briefly, but only for two weeks when I was in the Army Reserve; I was in a civil affairs unit and we spent the most pleasurable summer camp that you could imagine at the Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies studying the Middle East. This was back in the 1960s. For what it's worth, my personal conclusion then was that there is no solution to the Arab-Israeli problem because of insufficient common ground.

But I would say a couple of things. First of all, one has to be very careful with the use of the phrase "Israel lobby." And I think even Chas Freeman in the last few days has said that, well, maybe he oversimplified by blaming his demise on the Israel lobby at large. What he meant by that, and I think what most people mean when they say "Israel lobby," is the most radical, closed-minded branch of the pro-Israel forces. It's certainly not all Jews, because there is a broad spectrum of opinion among American Jews and among Jews everywhere, including in Israel, about what Israel should be doing, what Israeli policy should be, what the U.S. should be doing for Israel. There is a very free-ranging debate. If you read publications like, I don't know, The New York Review of Books, you might find the most scathing criticisms of Israeli policy. But the point is that there has been a so far successful effort to prohibit such debate by anyone anywhere near the U.S. Government, whether it be the Legislative Branch or the Executive Branch, and specifically people that have to do with foreign policy.

Q: Well, and also one has to say that this, I don't know, right wing or very pro hard line Israeli stand, has very strong support from certain elements of the Christian religious right, you know, using the Bible and that sort of thing.

SILINS: Yes, well I really don't have anything new on that, but there is another thing I would like to add here. I was born in a small country surrounded by, in fact annexed by, for quite a long time, most recently for half a century, by a hostile neighbor. That's Latvia. Latvians have felt, and still to this day feel, that their existence is by no means assured. Things could go to hell in a hand basket very quickly. The Israelis, many of them, feel the same threat to their existence, and rightly so. They are surrounded by countries that are very hostile to them and which contain people, some of whom do not even acknowledge Israel's right to exist. When you're in that frame of mind and you feel that your whole nation and people could be wiped out, and particularly if you have branded in your mind the memory of the Holocaust, which was truly one of the most horrible things in human history, you fall into the survivalist mode of thinking. And I've criticized this in Latvians who have less reason... well, I won't say less reason, but who have maybe similar reasons for doing it. By the survivalist mode, I mean that you have a very low level of trust in your neighbors, you have very narrow horizons, you don't expect much from the future, you feel you have to defend against anything that might threaten your interests, you fall into a zero-sum way of thinking. In other words, any gain to your potential enemies is a loss to you, therefore it must not be tolerated or even discussed, which is why some Israelis feel so strongly against our talking to people they consider terrorists and enemies, like Hamas for example, which I think is a mistake. You've got to talk to them. You don't have to negotiate with them in return for hostages, but you've got to talk to these people. So that's where, I think, the need for a broader, freer debate on policy issues arises here. It is a terrible mistake to force all of this underground; it has to be brought into the open, and that's why I feel so strongly about what was done to Chas Freeman.

Q: Well, just a footnote here, I refer people to the oral history that I did with William Harrop, who was appointed as ambassador to Israel during the early Clinton Administration, it was in '93, I guess, who made a rather mundane remark about the United States not having money to support everything and that Israel would have to be concerned about generating money not just from the United States. And this aroused a very minor little storm, but the Clinton Administration, brand new, unsure of itself, worried about this so-called Jewish support, withdrew him. I mean, it shows what happens. Israel in its actions and all has not been that benign an influence in its part of the world.

SILINS: The Chas Freeman case may not be entirely behind us. There was a piece, again in The Washington Post, a day or two ago by a member of their editorial staff, Charles Lane, which tries to paint this episode as a defining moment not just for Chas Freeman but for President Obama. Lane's argument is that now it's time for Obama to come clean and show where he stands on this issue. In other words, it's an attempt to trap Obama into declaring himself for 100 percent support of Israel that will be very difficult to back out of in the rest of his administration.

Q: Okay. Well, I guess this brings us up to date and we'll end at this point.

SILINS: Thank you very much.

"There follows a short personal journal I kept sporadically while ambassador to Latvia, beginning in late spring of 1993. I avoided classified material so it does not offer a comprehensive account of my official duties. Rather, I wanted to record my impressions of people and events, the sounds, smells and feel of the years when Latvia was reborn.

The text has been only minimally edited since it was written. "E." stands for my wife, Elizabeth; Nico (Nicholas), Kate, Matthew and Lucas are our children. In a few places I have added supplementary information in square brackets [ ].

Ints Silins, March 14, 2011"

Riga Journal_____

Saturday, May 1, 1993

Ominous signs from Moscow, a return to the Big Lie. Yeltsin issued a press release on April 25 accusing the Latvians of preparing for "ethnic cleansing." The next round of troop withdrawal negotiations was cancelled by the Russians shortly thereafter. Now the Russian accusation is being circulated at the United Nations. In the press, Deputy Foreign Minister Churkin menacingly (and falsely) accuses the Latvians of rendering further withdrawal talks pointless by unreasonably changing their negotiating stance, increasing their demands. Painting the victim as the trouble-maker: it reminds one of the Hitler-Stalin era. For the first time, these dark clouds on the eastern horizon stir in me a tangible dread that events here could take an ugly turn. Of course, the mood passes.

No storm clouds visible over Latvia this weekend. A warm, brilliant day. Trees, shrubs and flowers all finally coming into bloom. E. and I drove to Tervete, the ancient seat of Semigallian power. Wonderful hilly park with many paths, old pines; woodpeckers, gurgling streams, storks. Tour of the writer Anna Brigadere's house. Austere, handcrafted furnishings, very Swedish in feel. Cool inside. The stone house sits by a stream next to the park. The caretaker, Liga Klavina, is a woman bright with love for her work. She says the property will soon revert to the son of Brigadere's publisher, who will maintain it as a museum. Liga's father, now buried nearby, was a leading force behind creation of the park, she said. It's lovely, evocative of ancient lives.

Jacques de Beausse unfortunately must leave his post as French Ambassador here in only two weeks, a consequence of an unusual pre-election decision by the French Socialists to reassign 50 ambassadors. This move did nothing, of course, to improve the Socialists' disastrous showing in the March elections. It's a shame; Jacques and Jeanne-Marie have yet to move out of the Ridzene Hotel, where I also spent nine months. They were to live eventually in the French Embassy, just down the street from us on the other side of the school.

Jacques' father was in the French Legation here during 1939-40, the last days of Latvia's independence. Yesterday Jacques sent me a copy of his father's diary; he is preparing it for publication in a dual French-Latvian edition. It deserves the effort. Vivid descriptions, for example of the exodus of some 50,000 Baltic Germans upon Hitler's order, news of which reached Riga on October 7, 1939, erasing seven centuries of German Baltic history. Touching glimpses of life in a Riga buffeted between two immense clashing evil forces.

Sunday, May 2

A morning walk around the city. Riga is busily putting on her spring dress of leaves and flowers. Groups of adults and children in folk costume can be seen strolling about, some singing as they go. Yet also everywhere in Riga you still see rubble and decay that can only be described as the devastation of war - not just the Second World War, but the Cold War, also fought on Latvian territory.

The central market is teeming even on Sunday, the range of goods on offer constantly expanding. Kiwis, bananas, and mangoes are among the more exotic offerings, not seen in public in the Soviet era. But many of the other goods on offer were - shoes and shirts, odd bits of hardware, books and magazines, plastic shopping bags from Russia and the Caucasus with lurid illustrations. Russian is still the dominant language among the flea-marketeers that crowd the open area, but Latvian is making headway in the giant former Zeppelin hangars. I visit two of them, the meat and vegetable pavilions. Here you can buy good chicken for 235 Latvian Rubles a kilo. That comes to about $1.80/kg, with the LR now changing hands at 130 to the dollar. Of course, that is expensive to most Latvians, with average salaries on the order of 8,000 LR/month and rents and utilities no longer deceptively low as they were under the Soviet system.

Monday, May 3

A very military day. Delegations from a number of European defense ministries are meeting in Riga to share ideas on how to rebuild a defense structure after the collapse of communism. Meantime, two of our own military delegations arrive, one to set up our Military Liaison Team and the other to survey Latvian needs for surplus military goods - non-lethal, of course - that we may be able to offer.

Vilis Krumins, the old "nationalist-communist" now director of the Nature Museum, calls to say he has something important to tell me. I agree to see him on Tuesday.

Tuesday, May 4

We meet in Krumins' gloomy little office at the Nature Museum on Krisjana Barona street. He tries to cast doubt on Gorbunovs and Godmanis and to blame them in advance for violence he suggests is likely to strike Riga on May 9. They're not being tough enough, he says; they should ban "Den'" - the right-wing Russian paper that regularly advocates violence to reclaim the Baltic. I find him unconvincing. Krumins also questions the usual view of the 1950's Latvian movement that tried to gain some local control over Soviet policy after Stalin's death. Krumins says Berklavs is taking all the credit, but actually a lot of non-communists were important in the movement too. It is not at all clear to me what Krumins is after, but judging from his boast about all the journalists who have been to see him recently, self-promotion may be one objective. He offers to be of future service if needed.

I call on Foreign Minister Andrejevs on instructions from Washington. Andrejevs looks fit, thanks me for helping arrange a good reception for him in Washington. Gaining confidence in the job, he responds well, with wit.

E. and I stroll down Raina Boulevard to the farewell reception given by the de Beausse. Crowded. Jacques gives a nice speech with a sardonic tribute to his successor, "a specialist in Latin America personally selected by President Mitterrand." He tells me the embassy No. 2 will finish up work on his father's journal. I ask where he and his father lived. He says it was on Elizabetes street, perhaps number 13 - in any case, opposite that part of the park where eventually the Central Committee building, now the International Trade Center, was built in the Soviet period.

Agriculture Minister Dainis Gegers loses a no-confidence vote. Latvian Investment Bank President Ilze Jurkane resigns; reasons not clear, rumors abound. Apparently the EBRD, a partner in the bank, is checking the books.

Wednesday, May 5

General Johnson, Commander of NATO's northern forces, meets with NATO Ambassadors in Riga at Kerstin Biering's cozy Danish Embassy in Old Town, the former English Club and then Latvian PSR "Foreign Ministry." Kerstin has given her own touch to her office, where I remember meeting once or twice in the early 1980's with Nick Neilands, then Deputy Foreign Minister. It looked different then; certainly the feel of it was radically, utterly different then.

Not to our surprise, the general says he found Latvian forces still at a very basic level. (And, like me, took exception to the high-speed motorcade his Latvian hosts insisted on whisking him about in.)

Nico's grades arrive from Episcopal - pretty impressive, a 94.2 average for the quarter. His advisor reports he is still detached from the school's social life, though. His Civilization teacher's engaging comment suggests why: "Still tucked back in the corner of the classroom, Nico continues to use this perch as vantage point to shoot politically charged comments that drift out over the class and upset the balance. He is a wonderful addition to a group that is somewhere right of Attila the Hun."

Thursday, May 6

I call on the Russian Ambassador, Aleksandr Rannikh, in his new embassy, recently the Latvian Ministry of Culture - a very nice building if you don't mind that it was from here that the appalling Vishinsky declared Latvia's incorporation into the USSR. It is still sparsely furnished; Moscow is slow with funds, Rannikh says. I assure him my embassy also is far from finished.

With his beefy frame, round face and long black moustaches, Rannikh has an uncanny resemblance to a walrus. He gamely defends Yeltsin's statements at the start of our talk, accusing the Latvians of "provocations." Eventually he admits that points like those I have been making to him, about the need for Russia to avoid verbal excesses like "massive human rights violations" and "ethnic cleansing" and to take a more mature approach to Latvia, he has been trying to make to Moscow himself, but without much success so far.

Rannikh relates some of the difficulties of being a Russian ambassador to Latvia these days. Trouble sometimes springs from unexpected quarters.

First example. His press attachï¿½ is driving along a Riga street, Rannikh says, when suddenly another car veers alongside, forcing him to stop. The other driver accuses the press attachï¿½ of speeding; the press attachï¿½ denies it. The other driver punches him. The police are called; so is the Russian Embassy. The Russian consul arrives at the scene and protests the unauthorized detention of the press attachï¿½. The policeman takes the line that the other driver was simply making a perfectly legitimate citizen's arrest of a speeder. As the argument continues, the policeman, who like most of the former militsia is ethnically Russian, takes the consul aside. "I'm Russian, you're Russian," he tells the consul. "But because of what Russia did to Latvia, you're not going to get any help from me."

I tell Rannikh he must at least have obtained some relief from the Russian comedy festival featuring Arkady Raikin that I noticed being advertised two weeks ago, just opposite the Russian Embassy. Rannikh pulls another long face. He tells me this comedy festival is held here each year because Arkady Raikin was born in Riga, but this year it had a not-so-funny sequel. The festival coincided with the Russian referendum of April 25, so Raikin and some of his comic colleagues, a number of them also Jewish, came to the Russian Embassy to cast their votes. To their surprise and horror, the throng of voters angrily turned on them, shouting that Raikin and his kind represented the "Jewish mafia" that ruined Russia and lost the Baltic Republics.

Rannikh did not say so, but chances are the people who vilified Raikin would apply the same epithet to Rannikh's boss, Foreign Minister Kozyrev. Figures released by the Russian Embassy show that 80 percent of the Russian citizens who came there to vote in the referendum (mostly retired military officers) cast their ballots against Yeltsin and against reforms. It was the most negative turnout on any former Soviet territory.

I tell Rannikh about the rumors that violence might take place during the May 9 demonstrations. Rannikh says he does plan to lay a wreath at the "liberation" monument in Pardaugava at 10 a.m., but he will make a quick withdrawal to avoid being drawn into a "provocation" - still a favorite word, evidently, its meaning not too clear. Rannikh promises to do his best to damp down tensions. He tells me he does not expect real trouble.

Saturday, May 8

By car with E. to Bauska and Mezotne. Another beautiful day, bright and nearly 80 degrees. Spring plowing and planting well under way as we drive by. Some plowing being done by machine, some by horse; much planting, especially of potatoes, by hand, and a good deal of it by women in bathing suits.

We picnic by the softly flowing Lielupe in the Mezotne park. Swans and storks, fish jumping, children herding cows to fresh pasture across the river, farmhouses tucked among flowering fruit trees. Arcadia Felix.

On the way to our picnic site, we passed two memorial stones, one dedicated to Red Army combat engineers who laid a pontoon bridge across the Lielupe River under enemy fire on September 14, 1944. The other stone is dedicated to Latvians deported in 1940... it doesn't specify where or by whom. Fresh red tulips lie on both.

At a wooden table overlooking the river near the markers, six young Russians I would describe as "toughs" are having beer and loud conversation. Their presence clashes with the spirit of the setting. We wonder how they see their future in Latvia. Maybe that's what they're arguing about, but we're too distant to make out their words.

Sunday, May 9

"Victory Day" passes peacefully in Riga. Thousands of Russians lay flowers at the "Liberation" monument but no one tries to provoke violence. Latvian security forces keep a low profile. It may be that even the Russian hot-heads don't want to foul their nest here while Russia itself is in such sorry shape.

After a visit to Aunt Margita, E. and I stop at the Central Market to buy some Mother's Day flowers. Even late in the afternoon, it's still packed with buyers and sellers.

Tuesday, May 11

The bitter taste of a negative prediction proved true. Just as I warned the Department, when the embassy renovation crew began knocking out walls in what is to become, over my objection, the consular section, cracks started appearing on the floor above, including in our bedroom wall. These are 10-inch walls of brick and mortar, so this is no trivial matter. I order a halt to demolition until a structural engineer can assess the situation.

Wednesday, May 12

Jazz at the Embassy last night, a very successful concert by the Egils Straume Trio in our spacious living room to an audience of over 60 people. We invited mostly diplomats, bankers and businessmen since Egils is looking for contributions to help replace the equipment stolen from him a few months ago, equipment he needs to organize next year's music festival. Chilled champagne, hors d'oeuvres, a warm spring night, the windows open on the park, good jazz.... Touchingly, two people tell us it was the best evening they've had in Riga. But [our yellow Lab] Brio is desperately sick the next day, probably from too many surreptitious treats.

Moscow is taking an increasingly truculent tone toward Latvia and Estonia. With Lithuania just admitted into the Council of Europe and Estonia about to be despite Moscow's warning, Kozyrev cancels a planned visit to Strasbourg for the spring parliamentary session. In the West, troubling signs of an inclination toward appeasement, which I believe could inflame the situation.

A good, relaxed birthday talk by telephone with Nico yesterday. His 16th, an important one.

Thursday, May 13

A big conference on the economy at what used to be the (Soviet) Political Education Building. It opens with an old Latvian documentary film dating from about the thirties, but it could just as well be a Soviet product. Pistons pumping, gears meshing, chimneys belching smoke, heroic workers striding toward the camera whose lens is at knee level to make the sturdy proletarians tower among the clouds.... Disquieting. It reminds one that some of what has been in the deep freeze since the Soviets took over was put there when fascism had wide appeal, and not just in Germany.

Friday, May 14

The Russian Navy, what's left of it, is conducting exercises in the Latvian economic zone, apparently with live fire on one day. The Latvians protest, calling it an "unfriendly act."

The $400 million cement loan scandal continues to echo in the Latvian press. I find it baffling that people could get suckered into such a blatantly out-of-scale deal. How could anyone expect that a $400 million loan to Latvia, whatever its purpose, could fail ultimately to get the closest scrutiny? On the other hand, how could anyone believe that a German company which now is in receivership, according to the German Ambassador, and may already have been at the time the loan was being negotiated, could come up with that kind of money?

Sunday, May 16

Yesterday morning a walk through the Ethnographic Museum where the air was bright, soft and sweet with the fragrance of lilac and apple blossom.

Last night with E. to Koknese, about an hour's drive upstream along the Daugava. It was the closing ceremony of "Daugava Week," a series of displays and performances commemorating the ancient sites and events linked with the river that winds through Latvia's heart. The finale was an explosion of fire on the water, symbolizing the birth of a new sun to give strength to the Latvian people. Simultaneously, fireworks burst from the ruins of the Koknese fortress.

The castle sits at the confluence of the Perse and the Daugava. It used to tower far above the river. Now, after the Plavinas hydroelectric station was built, water laps its walls. Even today it is a beautiful site but when we spoke to those who knew it as it was, their eyes clouded with sorrow and anger at the loss. Latvian protest over the Plavinas HES, I was told, was one of the key events that led to the subsequent purge of "bourgeois nationalists" from the Latvian Communist Party.

At this moment I'm sitting in the car at the edge of a beautiful marsh, Kanieris, near the settlement called Antinciems. The marsh is reminiscent of the bird refuge at Chincoteague. Gulls are making a tremendous racket in the distance. Closer by, a fairly large animal occasionally splashes around in the water among the reeds but I can't make out what it is. There's a light, pleasant drizzle. A serious fisherman moves off at my arrival. It's past noon, so he's probably been here for some time. Later, some young boys on bicycles come up to fish at the same place.

A tractor passes pulling a wagon with long rough-cut planks sticking out every which way from the back. Later, as I drive along the dirt road in the direction from which the tractor came, I find he's been losing one plank about every 20 meters for a kilometer. That kind of numb-minded carelessness was a trademark of the Soviet work ethic; it apparently survived the collapse of the empire. For how long?

Monday, May 17

Norway's Constitution Day reception at the Writer's Union. Else Aalbu, in folk dress, stands next to Ambassador Torbjorn Aalbu, greeting the guests. Curiously, it seems to be her sole appearance in Riga each year.

The postponed troop withdrawal talks are under way again in Jurmala but not much is expected. The Russians are waiting for the Latvian elections, [Defense Committee Chairman Peteris] Simsons says. Defense Minister Jundzis tells me that, after two delays, Russian Defense Minister Grachev has promised to meet the Baltic Defense Ministers tomorrow in Vilnius. Jundzis says with a smile he has been allotted a half hour, beginning at 11 a.m.

Tuesday, May 18

We open the America Center Library in the attractive building on Smilsu Street near the Powder Tower that I picked out when it was under renovation by the Poles a year and a half ago.

Wednesday, May 19

Jackhammers shake the mirror as I shave at 7:45. Embassy renovation continues.

Thursday, May 20

A Latvian TV special on Imants Ziedonis, the only man in Latvia about whom I will say: I love him and admire him. He says he's not sure about his life, what he has accomplished. He is not, as the French saying goes, at ease within his skin. But more than anyone, almost despite himself, he stands for much of what is best about Latvia.

Saturday, May 22

On the way to Kuldiga, near Sabile, I spot a sign pointing into the woods to "Maras Kambari." Intrigued, we turn down a sandy road into the woods, eventually leave the car and walk along a path high above the Abava River that leads through the Forest Primeval to the "chambers," sandstone caves in a gorge.

At Kuldiga, while E. explores the town, I sit in the sun with book and binoculars at an overlook on the cliff above the broad falls of the River Venta. It's called "Kuldigas Rumba." Upstream are the falls, downstream rapids and the Roman arches of the stone bridge spanning the river. The scene is reminiscent of America in the 40's or 50's - kids shooting the rapids on a large inner tube, others swimming, splashing and fooling around near the falls. Three boys, wading up to their armpits, are doing some serious fishing in the frothy water below the falls. It's windy; gulls wheel and soar above the patch of reeds upriver, catching insects. A slim, quiet Latvian boy, perhaps eight, adds himself to our company. E. gives him a cold ginger ale, I let him look through my binoculars. He wears a baseball cap with the slogan, "PHIL'S AUTO REPAIR - IF WE CAN'T FIX IT, IT AIN'T BROKE."

Sunday, May 23

It hasn't rained for weeks. The City Canal opposite the Embassy is low, sluggish and a dull dark sewer-brown. I walk upstream to where the canal enters from the Daugava, to see whether it would help if more water were pumped in during dry spells. Unfortunately, probably not. Where it feeds into the canal, near the Central Market, the Daugava itself is low, sluggish and the same unappetizing brown.

Then to the Liberation Monument in Pardaugava, a long walk. Dedicated to those who fought on the Soviet side in 1941-1945, it was too big to remove without a fuss promptly after independence, as the Lenin statue was, and is still the focus for gatherings of the faithful, as on May 9. But it is getting noticeably shabbier as brass is pilfered and slabs of marble peel off.

On the far side of the monument, where the tall tower and its platform are three-quarters surrounded by a moat, the large brass numbers that remain now read:

1 9 4 1 * 9 4

Petty theft or prophecy? Is this some die-hard Russian's prediction that the decisive battle for Riga will be fought next year?

Wednesday, May 26

Premiere of the film "Buris" (Cage) at the Reitern House. Based on the book by Alberts Bels but with a great deal of interpolation by the director/producer, Ansis Epners. A very depressing film, unfortunately made several years too late. It tells the lunatic tale of a man whose own brother locks him up in a cage hidden away in the woods. If it had been released during the Soviet era, it would have been applauded as a courageous indictment of the Soviet occupation - as Bels' book was. Today, few want to subject themselves to the raw, grinding prison mood of that era. A shame, since the film is superbly photographed, with good acting by Ivars Kants in the lead role.

For hostages after their release, it can be therapeutic and even necessary to retell the experience of captivity; that does not guarantee it will be entertaining for their audience. I fear "Buris" will land with a thud at the festivals.

At last the dry spell has broken. Rain last night and some more today, with much cooler temperatures. I hope the same is true all over the country.

Saturday, May 29

To Jurmala, or more precisely Melluzi, for lunch at the summer house Frances and [British Ambassador] Richard Samuel are renting. On the edge of the pine woods, it turns out to have a lovingly tended garden and lots of cosy corners and vine-enclosed nooks. Sirka and [Finnish Ambassador] Antti Lassilla, Torbjorn Aalbu and [Lutheran Minister] Arden and Janna Haug fill out the company. An implacably sharpening earache eventually drives Janna from the table, and we head back to Riga for a doctor.

Sunday, June 6

Just back from the Press Ball, which Elizabeth and I left at the shockingly early hour of 11 p.m. More professionally arranged, it lacked some of the naive excitement we felt at last year's, the first to be held in newly independent Latvia.

Today is the second and final day of elections. In Riga and the outlying precincts that I visited by car, the voting was taking place in a quiet and businesslike way with little stir to reveal that anything remarkable was going on. The only unusual event was a small demonstration by a few hundred Russians, mostly pensioners, complaining about not being able to vote.

Monday, June 7

The early returns show a plurality for Latvia's Way, the "best and brightest of East and West" ticket, with Gorbunovs and Meierovics at the top. It wins about 32 percent of the votes, which translates to about 36 seats in the 100-seat Saeima. Next is the Latvian Independence Movement (LNNK), but they have less than half the votes of Latvia's Way, followed by Janis Jurkans' Concord for Latvia, the Farmers' Union, the Christian Democrats, the Democratic Center, For Fatherland and Freedom, and Equal Rights.

Poor Godmanis; the Popular Front is well below the 4% threshold, so he doesn't even get into the Saeima. Perhaps it's just as well, but I sympathize with him. I send him a letter and a biography of fellow physicist Richard Feynman, "Genius," to cheer him up.

Wednesday, June 9

With Imants Ziedonis to visit some of the "sacred oaks" that he and his merry band started to preserve some 15 years ago. Near Seja he shows us perhaps the biggest oak in Latvia, whose trunk it takes nine persons to span with their arms. It is about 800 years old, they say. The trunk is completely hollow; a hole has been cut in it in preparation for preservation work. I step inside. A strange sensation, like being in a savage cathedral. The hollow reaches all the way to the top, where you can see the sky through a large opening.

Saturday, June 12

Liepaja, city of lindens. A heartbreaking place, full of parks, trees and terribly run down old houses. For a long time it was a closed city, the preserve of the Soviet Baltic Fleet, and even the beaches were raked every evening to record the footprints of those entering or departing illegally by sea. The mayor, Imants Vismins, tells me when he was in his teens, he and his friends used to go for illicit swims at night, backing carefully into the water and then walking normally when they exited again, leaving many footprints in the sand mysteriously coming from the sea to baffle the Soviet guards.

Peter the First and Charles XII, great enemies, both lived here for a time. It strikes me that the people, Russified though the city is, have a very Western look and move at a brisk pace. It's Latvia's rock music capital. This truth is drilled into us as rock music blares out all night from just below our hotel windows, robbing us of sleep.

The Russians have done a lot to be ashamed of here, and they're not departing in style. There are still 128 ships in Liepaja's military harbor, but what's shameful is the number that are sitting on the bottom, both surface vessels and submarines. I'm on board the Gallatin, a Coast Guard cutter paying the first U.S. ship visit since Latvia disappeared behind the Iron Curtain. From the bridge, we can see two submarines grounded, at an advanced stage of dismantlement, one with only the conning tower above water. Behind us is a once-formidable guided missile cruiser, the Bezobrazniy, being transformed into junk, but at least it's still afloat.

Thursday, June 24

To Valmiera yesterday for Jani - St. John's Eve, or Midsummer - on an outing organized for the diplomatic corps by the Foreign Ministry. We began with a tour of the Valmiera Church, then to a newly privatized farm to make the acquaintance of their cows, sheep and goats, and a very lovable kitten. They served the traditional midsummer snack: piragi, cheese, freshly brewed beer. Then to a lakeside restaurant/dacha, also brand new, for lunch. Rannikh and I rode a large, spirited horse up and down a few turns. For me, it was the first time on horseback in twenty-some years. The climax of the evening was to have been an outdoor concert attended by over 30,000 - Zinge-93. There were some engaging performers, but for the most part it was loud, even raucous, and we were uncomfortable sitting on the ground. We left after about three hours, taking our time driving back to Riga through the lush midsummer countryside.

While stopped by the roadside to take pictures of a field with haystacks, I was greeted by a woman I knew riding by on a bicycle. She invited us to her new country house, where she, her husband and two children were spending Jani. So we had a genuine Latvian midsummer night after all.

Friday, June 25

The bluster from Moscow, especially against Estonia, is now much sharper. Yesterday Yeltsin put out a statement containing the following appalling language:

"... it seems that the Estonian Government has misjudged Russia's goodwill and, giving way to the pressure of nationalism, has 'forgotten' about certain geopolitical and demographic realities. The Russian side has means at its disposal to remind Estonia about these."

This is not all. Foreign Minister Kozyrev, his deputy Churkin and other Russian officials have also jumped into the fray, indicating a coordinated attack. To its credit, Washington has already fired off a demarche to Moscow asking for clarification "at the highest appropriate level" of the Yeltsin statement.

The Russians making these statements are reported to be fired with sincere outrage. No doubt. The root cause, it seems to me, is the lingering ignorance of contemporary history in Russia. As Aleksandr Rannikh admitted to me, even many Russians in Latvia don't know what Russia did to the Baltic people. Most Russians seem to consider themselves either victims of the Soviet regime and/or heroes who helped topple it, thereby liberating the Balts. They naturally are outraged at the impudence of Estonians and Latvians for presuming to deny citizenship and other privileges to any Russians. Even military officers and their families are immune from eviction because the Russians refuse to consider that they were ever an army of occupation.

One can sense a natural tendency among Western policymakers to lean on the Balts in order to placate the Russians. I fear this course of action will exacerbate the problem by spurring the Russians on to bullying that will provoke the Balts to violence. Alternatively, and in fact more probably, the Russians will stage the violence themselves to excuse the show of force for which they have already rhetorically set the stage. Diminishing the West's leverage for dealing with this disturbing scenario is the economic recession and lack of clear leadership that has already caused the vaunted Western assistance package for Russia, at least the $4 billion privatization fund, to shrink embarrassingly in the past few days.

Saturday, June 26

As Nico and I return from a bike ride around Pardaugava, to my surprise Hans-Peter Furrer, Political Director of the Council of Europe, turns up. He and Lynn Davies arrived in the middle of the night from Tallinn. Their visit there was only coincidentally related to Estonia's crisis with Moscow; it had been scheduled two weeks earlier but the timing was right to offer a COE "expertise" of the Estonian "Foreigners' Law" that has Moscow so upset. Peter says it was decided after [COE Secretary General] Catherine Lalumiere's recent Washington visit to have more "on the spot" meetings between U.S. and COE officials - of which this is one. This also explains why Heiner Klebes, Clerk of the COE Parliamentary Assembly, called me yesterday to say he will be in Riga July 5-8 and would like to see me. It's good to see old friends from Strasbourg. Nico takes the opportunity to send along some letters to his friends.

Sunday, July 4

Latvia has been having a party for two weeks, with the midsummer celebration merging into the song and dance festival that ends tonight. We added our contribution with a July 4 cookout/reception held in splendid weather by the shore of the Baltic at the Hotel Dzintars, under the pines. A great success.

Last night we went to the closing performance of the dance festival. A stubbornly persistent drizzle failed to dampen the spirits of the dancers or the audience. Lovely girls in long woolen skirts that stand out like bells when they twirl, the young men mostly in light grey and tan wool, many wearing tall broad-brimmed black hats that give good protection from the rain.

Tuesday, July 6

First session of the Saeima, Latvia's first truly freely elected parliament since the Soviet occupation. Two deputies are missing: Alfred Rubiks, the former Communist party leader, who is in jail; and Joachim Siegerist, the German rightist, who makes a show of "not wanting to sit next to former communists" (Anatolijs Gorbunovs was elected Speaker).

Thursday, July 8

Senators Phil Gramm and John McCain arrive for a lightning visit, just in time to be the first foreigners to call on newly inaugurated Latvian President Guntis Ulmanis. Ulmanis makes a good impression, a bit rough-hewn and lacking English but unpretentious and straightforward. My guess is he has a firm backbone and will be an activist president.

Friday, July 9

After a working visit to Cesis, where we also see our National Guard giving training in first aid to the Latvian Home Guards, we continue on toward Valmiera. On Lake Vaidava we stay at a newly built guest house overlooking the water. Nico, Kate and Brio are also along. Lovely weather; we swim, boat, walk. Nico and I fish industriously and with pleasure but totally without results.

Friday, July 16

Bill Luers, now President of New York's Metropolitan Museum, comes through Riga with a delegation of Directors from Scudder's New Europe Fund. Elizabeth and I lunch with Bill and Wendy at the Tower Restaurant. We discuss the Estonian-Russian tension - a "referendum" is being conducted by the Russians in the Narva area on autonomy. Bill is active in various foreign policy projects; agrees no one is focusing on how to restrain Russia, other than buying good will through Western assistance. He proposes I give a presentation at the Council on Foreign Relations when I return for consultations in September, suggests we invite George Kennan to visit Riga.

Saturday, July 17

Off in the car with E. with the intent of finding a nice place for a walk along the Gauja River near Sigulda. But several attempts to follow small roads down to the river fail us. We return to the public area below Turaida Castle, where we rent a rowboat and picnic on the river.

Sunday, July 25

Yesterday a torrent of rain soaked Riga, flooding Raina Boulevard. The wind drove water through many of our windows. In the meantime, the renovation work is reaching a crescendo. For the past two weeks, clouds of dust and smoke have been rising into our apartment from below. This week some 100 20-foot steel piles are being driven in a rectangle by the Embassy's southwest corner as the workers prepare to excavate a giant pit to bury fuel tanks for the emergency generator. The vibrations cause huge cracks to appear above the window in my office and in the consular section below. Yesterday as I was looking out our bedroom window, a fir tree collapsed in the wind, its roots having been severed by construction work. I'm worried about the large trees on the other side; the piles are being driven only ten feet from their trunks but their roots are cut off by the workers even closer to the tree as they prepare to sink the piles. The soil is very sandy, unstable; the cracks in the Embassy may be due to further settling, not just vibration.

Thursday, July 30

E. departs for Washington, to stay at the Ludingtons' house, where Nico, Kate, Matthew and perhaps Lucas will progressively gather. I will join them August 18.

Friday, July 30

A human skeleton turns up near the southeast corner of the Embassy as the workers dig a trench for fuel lines. The body was buried in a sitting position with the hips below the skull. We inform the police, who prepare a report and take possession of the skull. It appears to be quite old; not a recent crime, in any case.

Meanwhile, the southwest section of the Embassy, which has obviously settled in past years, is now visibly sinking again, its new decline prompted by the digging of the large pit for the fuel tanks. Cracks multiply above the windows and the outer wall. In the consular section, bricks and plaster start to fall. Much work will be needed to repair the damage once the building is stabilized. The renovation team resolves to work through the weekend to bury the fuel tanks as quickly as possible.

I meet with Ojars Kehris, now Economics Minister. He says it will take two or three weeks more to get the new government structures organized and then focus on how to implement the development plan outlined in the "Latvia 2000" proposal.

Saturday, August 7

To Sigulda for an opera recital in the ruins - not the Turaida palace, but on the near side of the Gauja River. It was successful beyond my expectations. The soloists were three Latvians who perform mostly abroad - Inese Galante, Ingus Petersons, and Egils Silins - and one whose principal foreign journey was to Siberia courtesy of Joseph Stalin - Janis Sprogis. They did Bizet, Mozart, Puccini, Verdi, Tchaikovsky... Mostly familiar arias but performed with great talent, all the more touching because it was offered as a gift to the Latvian people, since I doubt the performers were paid anything worth mentioning. The weather cooperated, in fact contributed to the drama, with rain threatening off and on and finally, as though also obedient to the conductor's baton, sprinkling in earnest right after the closing aria.

Sunday, August 8

To Mezciems, on the coast north of Riga, for two hours of sun, sand and solitude.

Wednesday, August 11

Margaretha af Ugglas, now Swedish Foreign Minister, pays a lightning visit to Riga; mostly, I think, to explore how the CSCE can help avoid a Narva-like crisis here. We talk briefly at the Parliament building between her meeting with Gorbunovs and her closing press conference. I express some reservations about a CSCE presence along Estonian lines in Latvia; I fear it may exacerbate the situation rather than calming it.

Thursday, August 12

President Guntis Ulmanis is impelled by his own history (Siberian exile as an infant) and the pressure of his constituents to seek redress from Russia for Soviet wrongs. I tell him it is not enough to be right, to win the legal argument; that won't bring the West to Latvia's rescue should Russia turn ugly. Better to learn what one can from Finland's example. The important thing now is to get the rest of the troops out.

Monday, August 16

The second day of a visit by Admiral Paul Miller, CINCLANT/SACLANT; he is here in his NATO role. A very engaging and thoughtful commander. He sees peacekeeping as the centerpiece of military activity for the near term. He tells me he expects, in his CINCLANT role, to be given command of all U.S. forces (with exceptions such as MAC, SAC, etc.). He is also urging a statutory change of the interagency process used to reach decisions on the employment of U.S. military force; the present one is inadequate and only worked by luck during Desert Storm, he maintains.

Wednesday, August 18

Above the Baltic aboard an Antonov AN-24 of Latavio, the Latvian airline. A hand-me-down from the all too recent Soviet era, the aircraft smells depressingly of stale sweat and vibrates furiously, but aside from having two bald tires it seems up to the task of getting me to Helsinki, where I will catch a flight to New York and then Washington. The sea below is that odd green that Joyce named so unforgettably in Ulysses.

Thursday, August 19

In Washington, at the Ludingtons' house near the Cathedral. I spend a long morning in bed with toast, coffee and The Washington Post, to get the flavor of life in America. From Page One:

The lead article - "Judge Lets Girl Sever Birth Ties" - recounts the decision by a court in Sarasota, Florida to deny the biological parents of a 14-year-old girl, Kimberly, visitation rights or any further contact with her. A hospital had mistakenly given Ernest and Regina Twigg another baby in place of Kimberly shortly after birth. "I want them out of my life," Kimberly said of the Twiggs. County Circuit Judge Stephen Dakan agreed she has the right to make that choice.

"In Kidnap Pit, Mind Over Matter" tells of a kidnapped man's struggle to survive in a pit nine and a half feet deep and about five feet wide just off the Henry Hudson Parkway on Manhattan's Upper West Side, where he was held 12 days for ransom. Harvey Weinstein credited Marine training and Koestler's Darkness at Noon with helping him maintain his mental balance. Following his release, he told the press: "I live in the greatest city in the world. I am proud to be a New Yorker, and what happened to me in the last 12 days just redoubled my pride."

Still on Page One: "Examiner Says P.G. Man Shot in Back" covers the fatal shooting in Prince Georges County, Maryland of Duane Void by an off-duty District policeman, Kenneth Milling. The incident was triggered when Milling's pit bull and Void's German Shepherd got into a fight. Void hit the pit bull with two rounds from a .25 caliber semiautomatic handgun. The policeman fired eleven rounds with his Glock 9mm pistol, three of which hit Void. Milling evidently would have fired more, but his gun jammed. Police said there was not enough evidence to arrest Milling; they are turning the case over to the state's attorney for presentation to a grand jury.

That these three items appear on the front page of the leading newspaper in our nation's capital is only partly explained by the fact that this is August and both the Congress and the President have left town.

Saturday, August 21

Reading a magazine article, I come across this quotation from Cavafy:

When you start on your journey to Ithaca, then pray that the road is long, full of adventure, full of knowledge.... Always keep Ithaca fixed in your mind. To arrive there is your ultimate goal. And if you find her poor, Ithaca has not defrauded you. With the great wisdom you have gained, with so much experience, you must surely have understood by then what Ithacas mean.

Indeed I found her poor and I did feel defrauded. Experience I have; it is wisdom I must seek.

Sunday, September 26

New York. President Clinton's limousine, preceded by a staggering number of motorcycle police and other vehicles, passes me at Fifth Avenue and 63d as I am walking back to the Barbizon Hotel a little after 7 pm. There are two identical cars flying the American flag; he is in the second.

It is the closest I am likely to get to the President this trip. The President will meet tomorrow with the three Baltic Presidents, but his own ambassadors are not invited to the meeting. I came back to New York anyway, having other things to do. The most important is a meeting with George Kennan, set for 4 pm Tuesday at the Council on Foreign Relations.

Tuesday, September 28

A brilliant day in Central Park, cool and clear, so welcome after three days of enervating heat and moisture. I find a spot by the fountain near the boathouse to take the sun and read Anatol Lieven's The Baltic Revolution, a provocative book that would have benefited from editing - at the price of becoming less interesting, of course.

In the afternoon, first a meeting at the Waldorf with, on the Latvian side, President Ulmanis, Foreign Minister Andrejevs, and Ambassador to the U.S. Kalnins. The American principals are Strobe Talbott and Nick Burns. Ulmanis and Andrejevs, who have just received a report on the latest sessions of Latvian-Russian troop withdrawal talks, focus on the Skrunda early-warning radar, which the Russians say they need to hold on to for another ten years. Ulmanis says that, again, the Russians maintain there is an understanding between them and the U.S. government that supports their continuing claim to the radar. Talbott and Burns categorically deny any such "understanding," saying the decision on what agreement to strike with Russia on Skrunda is entirely up to Latvia.

On to the Council on Foreign Relations, at 58 East 68th Street. Kennan arrived promptly, marvelously fit and alert for a man almost 90. He walks carefully and carries a cane and he told me one ear isn't much good, but his eyes are bright and his mind is sharp. I doubt I'll be as fit when I'm 70, should I live that long.

We talked for an hour, first about Kennan's life in Riga, of which I knew the outlines from his Memoirs. When I asked if Russia would respect Baltic independence, Kennan without hesitation gave an optimistic reply. Russia, he said, had already given up the Baltic littoral at the beginning of the Soviet period; it was only Hitler that brought the Russians back. Nor did he think it likely that too much Baltic success, economic or otherwise, would attract Russian aggression; rather, Russia would seek to emulate it.

Kennan was worried, however, about a tendency he had witnessed during his own time in Riga of the Latvians taking too narrowly ethnic a view and shrinking their horizons, for example by insisting on the sole use of the Latvian language. (He mentioned as one minor but revealing example that opera programs, previously in French, came to be distributed only in Latvian). Kennan was not, as I had surmised from his memoirs, overly charmed by Latvians during his tour. It was the "saving grace" of Riga, he said, that it also had a rich store of German, Russian and Jewish culture to draw on.

I invite Kennan back to Riga, perhaps in connection with a summer trip to Norway, which he still takes regularly. He thanks me but says his age does impose limits on what he can undertake.

In the evening, to the Hotel Pierre for the annual Appeal of Conscience awards dinner. Speakers are Russian Foreign Minister Kozyrev and Strobe Talbott. One of the recipients, Aleksey II, Patriarch of Russia, has left New York early in an attempt to mediate the worrisome power struggle between Yeltsin, his former Vice President Rutskoy, and the Russian parliament.

Monday, October 4

Riga. This morning we watch television in amazement as tank shells slam into Moscow's White House, seat of Russia's retrograde, deluded parliament. Yeltsin, rallying the military to his side, has decided that enough is enough; Khasbulatov and Rutskoy, by calling for mob assaults on the Ostankino TV station, have exceeded all reasonable bounds. The hitherto peaceful standoff around the White House turns into a bloody assault. Flames and smoke pour out of the windows, blackening the upper floors of the huge white building. Soon the renegade parliament surrenders. Rutskoy and Khasbulatov, having received guarantees through two embassies that they will not be shot, file as prisoners from the burning building.

The spectacle of an armored attack by the executive branch on the legislature in the heart of Moscow is too bizarre to be real. I feel an odd sense of detachment. Apparently many Muscovites felt that way, too. As the tanks and soldiers drew up to encircle the White House and prepare their assault, women with shopping bags and men with briefcases continued to walk calmly through their lines, seemingly oblivious to this epochal struggle for Russia's political soul.

In Riga, people are nervous but not panicky; there are no demonstrations. Once Yeltsin's victory is clear, the chief worry here is about what Yeltsin may have had to promise the military to win their support - and what that will mean for Russia's policy toward the Baltic States.

One indicator of confidence here is the currency exchange rate. Despite the crisis, the lat strengthens slightly, going from $1.62 to $1.63. In Moscow, on the other hand, the ruble, which had firmed somewhat after dropping well below 1000 to the dollar, takes another downward dip.

Saturday, October 9

Elizabeth, my mother and I spend most of the afternoon with former foreign minister Janis Jurkans and his wife Ilze at their lakeside house at Langstini. Both are controversial, he for going too far to accommodate Russian interests in Latvia and she for her part in a bizarre $400 million credit fiasco while at the head of the Latvian Investment Bank. To her credit, she at least neutralized the operation so the only cost to Latvia was embarrassment. Both are high-energy people without, at the moment, sufficient scope for their ambitions.

Monday, November 1

The Secretary of State, Warren Christopher, came through Riga on a brief overnight visit October 26-27. It was our highest-level visit since Vice President Quayle was here last winter.

Christopher, an introverted and indeed rather shy man, arrived in Riga at a time when his media coverage had reached new lows. The day before his arrival, The International Herald Tribune carried Congressman Frank X. McCloskey's call for his resignation, significant since McCloskey is a Democrat and a Foreign Affairs Committee member. The press has been full of scathing criticism of President Clinton's foreign policy and Christopher's role in it, with the fiascos in Bosnia, Somalia and Haiti drawing the most fire.

Nevertheless, it was a successful visit because it underlined high-level U.S. support for the Baltic States, including the President's personal and continuing engagement. The announcement of a further $160 million for officer housing to support troop withdrawals from Latvia and Estonia made a positive impression.

The Secretary saw President Ulmanis, Prime Minister Birkavs and representatives of the various Russian and Jewish communities; he met with all three Baltic Foreign Ministers. Tuesday the 27th was his 68th birthday. Although the advance team had strongly urged us to discourage all public festivities, I gave him a small gift (a leather box with the Riga city seal) and got him to stop briefly by the Embassy, where Elizabeth had lined all the staff up on the front steps as we drove up.

Russian troop withdrawals and Russian-Latvian relations were the chief issues; the Skrunda early-warning radar got a lot of individual attention. The Secretary denied any "deal" between us and Russia on Skrunda and said the issue was one to be decided between Latvia and Russia - but he suggested a reasonable approach might be an interim period allowing Russia to plug the hole in its early-warning net that the loss of Skrunda would leave.

Tuesday, November 2

A quick trip to Tukums to see a gratis pollution-abatement project by Baltec. President Ulmanis was also there. It's at a fuel storage site but the real problem was caused by leakage from a fuel line carrying aviation fuel to the nearby Soviet military airfield. As a result, the ground is absolutely saturated with fuel. A test tube from a monitoring hole comes up with 80% fuel and just a little water. Scary. It will take years to clean up the soil and groundwater.

Sunday, November 21

Standing in the snow on the terrace of Riga Castle, we watch fireworks across the Daugava celebrating the 75th anniversary of the declaration of Latvia's independence. At the reception afterward, President Ulmanis offers Elizabeth the first slice of Latvia's birthday cake.

Monday, January 17, 1994

I attend a meeting of Latvia's National Security Council chaired by President Ulmanis. The ostensible purpose is for Charles Kupchan of the National Security Council staff to brief on the Partnership for Peace, but I also use the occasion to brief on last week's summit discussion of Baltic issues. Yeltsin agreed to reduce the length of time Russia asks to stay on at Skrunda - to four years plus 18 months for dismantling - but he voiced the usual concerns about the treatment of Russians in Latvia. The President said we would keep an eye on these, primarily through the CSCE mission in Latvia, and react appropriately if any violations are reported.

Sunday, January 30

My second exercise in transhumance. I am winging toward Washington, escorting all eight political faction leaders from Latvia's Saeima plus Foreign Minister Andrejevs and three of his aides to top-level meetings in Washington. The point is to persuade not only the government but also the opposition that it is in Latvia's interest to seize this opportunity to settle the troop withdrawal and Skrunda squabble with Russia. The offer may not meet every standard of justice and equity, but no better deal seems likely to present itself. The risk of leaving the matter unresolved is high as Russia stumbles toward another flirtation with easy answers, marked by nostalgia for the "near abroad."

Yesterday we overnighted in Frankfurt at the airport Sheraton, and I invited the entire delegation to gather for a beer and a preview of the program. It turned out to be one of the very few times all delegation leaders had assembled. Perhaps I should continue this tradition of informal gatherings in Riga.

Saturday, February 5

JFK Airport. On the way back to Riga via New York and Copenhagen after a dazzling program for the Latvian delegation in Washington. We saw everyone. There were extended discussions with Secretary Christopher, Deputy Secretary-designate Strobe Talbott, Deputy Secretary of Defense (and Secretary-designate) William Perry and their immediate advisors, and a session lasting almost an hour and a half in the White House Situation Room with Nick Burns of the NSC. After a half-hour meeting with National Security Advisor Tony Lake in the West Wing's Roosevelt Room, President Clinton and Vice President Gore both dropped in for a few encouraging words and a photo. And, as they say, much, much more. A unique program in my experience for any parliamentary delegation. A convincing demonstration of the high interest in Latvia's problems at the top of the American leadership.

My impressions of the President? Clinton and Gore are both large men of the college-fraternity type, with Clinton considerably the larger of the two. Clinton's bulbous nose and the way he bulges out his suit give the effect of a large inflated rubber doll. No doubt most famous people tend to strike us oddly in some way in person because we have formed a strong but flawed conception of them through their pictures, but I've seen my share of world leaders and with Clinton the air of unreality was strong.

Monday, February 21

Jurmala. A long solitary walk, almost a mile, out onto the frozen Baltic. Beyond the low jumble of ice dunes near the shore, the sea was frozen smooth, broken only at wide intervals by re-frozen fissures that had the form of rivers. As I walked, a layer of snow crystals crunched like cornflakes under my boots.

Only a few people, including one ice fisherman, were out that far. I walked as far out as I could go, up to a stretch of open water. There I had to stop, although I could see more snow-covered ice beyond the dark water.

Tuesday, April 12

Paris. In Paris with E. since last Monday on a spring vacation, staying at a small hotel called Le Jardin de Cluny, on the Left Bank near the intersection of the Boulevards St. Jacques and St Germain. Lazy, lovely days just wandering around the city, going to museums now and then but mostly just walking, looking, drinking in this wonderful city. The weather is blustery, very dramatic on our first two days, swinging from sunshine to blowing rain with only a few minutes in between. It's exciting, energizing.

Monday, July 18

The fishing village of A, Moskenes Island, Norway. I'm sitting at the kitchen table of a "sjohus" overlooking the tiny harbor of this little village, above which tower the crags that make up most of the Lofoten Islands. Nico and I are on a trip that began in Riga on July 10, took us by way of Tallinn and Helsinki to Turku, then up the west coast of Finland above the Arctic Circle, briefly through Sweden by way of Kiruna into Norway above Narvik, and then across by car ferry from Skutvik to Svolvaer, from where we drove down to this lovely spot near the end of Moskenes Island. Yesterday we hired a small boat with a four horsepower engine to go, through rather choppy water as it turned out, to fish near a small island offshore. Nico hooked one, but that was the extent of our catch until later in the day, when I hooked a strange mutant-looking sea creature from the balcony outside the sjohus kitchen.

This trip is something of a reward to myself for a tremendously busy spring and summer at the Embassy, including our first inspection and culminating in a visit on July 6 by President Clinton. That visit was the first in history by a sitting American president to a Baltic capital; Nixon's visit last year for all I know was the first one by a former president.

The public highlight of Clinton's visit was a speech at the Freedom Monument, a punchy, supportive political act more than a policy statement. It seemed consciously designed to forestall any possible comparisons to what Safire and others have dubbed President Bush's ill-fated "Chicken Kiev" speech. Clinton came out four-square for Baltic independence, albeit with a tactful reminder that "freedom without tolerance is freedom unfulfilled," an entirely acceptable way to make a point that will ease the political sting for Moscow of the speech's main thrust.

By now it is almost 11 p.m. and Nico and I are on a car ferry passing Skrova Island. Forced to abandon our plan to take the ferry from Moskenes to Bodo because the ferry stopped loading two cars before ours, and yet another missed ferry later, we are finally on our way from Svolvaer back to Skutvik, from where we will push on for probably another three or four hours until we reach the Saltstraumen, said to be one of the most powerful currents in the world. There we will probably spend two days testing this "El Dorado for anglers," as our guidebook calls it.

We wound up at the Lofotens largely at the urging of Norway's Ambassador to Latvia, Torbjorn Aalbu, himself a native of Trondheim. I'm glad we took his suggestion. The islands leave an indelible impression, towering out of the sea collectively as a virtually unbroken craggy wall. When seen individually, especially in misty weather when their peaks are shrouded in clouds, some of the smaller ones look like the mushroom cloud of an exploding hydrogen bomb.

One of the more unusual features of Clinton's visit was his reading to a gathering of Embassy staff from all three Baltic capitals of a fragment from a letter from George Kennan, a sort of bridge across several generations (Kennan is 90) of U.S. diplomats in Riga. Kennan wrote the message in Norway, I believe in Kristiansund. Kennan, whose wife is Norwegian, generally summers in Norway, and is probably here now. I saw an advance copy of the text; I suppose I should wait until the signed original arrives before replying.

I must mention an unforgettable, jarring scene along the road as we were making our way from A to Svolvaer. Three young boys, probably between seven and nine, were gleefully jumping up and down on the roof of a white car which, its windshield already crazed, seemed destined to become trash metal in short order. It was stunning, even hilarious to see such young boys so zestfully engaging in wanton vandalism so publicly in such an idyllic setting. But then I've had doubts about the Swedish approach to childraising since our time in Stockholm.

Tuesday, July 26

We are at Stryn, on the Innvikfjord in Norway, an arm of the Nordfjord, staying in a private home with a superb view over the water. This privilege is costing us 350 kroner per night. It is worth it. We tried hard to find a campsite last night, but it seems that in this part of Norway every usable bit of horizontal ground is already spoken for. We will spend another night here, in part because I need to have the Volvo's brakes checked and this is about our last chance before it forces us to postpone our Stockholm-Helsinki ferry trip.

Our vacation so far has been colorful, to say the least. Our last campsite (we acquired a tent about a week ago) was in a high valley off the Romsdalsfjord near the town of Bostolen, by a wide, cold, quickly flowing stream - an almost ideal site, except it happened also to be a favoured grazing place for a small herd of cows. They paid us more than one unwanted visit, showing a sort of placid, dull curiosity in our car and belongings and proving hard to move on.

We came to Stryn from Geiranger because it was said to be a good place for trout. So far it has been a total failure in that respect. Luckily we have some fish to our credit from earlier stops, including Saltstraumen, so the humiliation is not too intense.

Geiranger, by the way, of which I had romantic memories [from a solo visit ten years earlier], was teeming with tourists and shrouded in a dull haze. Our visit turned into a search of all the tourist kiosks for a shoulder bag of the type I bought there ten years ago. But the bag is no longer offered, so we settled for T-shirts and a nice lunch. In all, an extremely "tourist" experience.

Sunday, July 31

Aboard the M/S Tallink, entering Tallinn harbor. We boarded the Tallink this morning in Helsinki, a few hours after crossing over from Stockholm on the far more posh - and certainly, at 656 feet, far larger - M/S Silja Europa. The Europa was awesome as an engineering tour de force, whisper quiet as it pushed its enormous hull through the water. But inside, tourists kept things at the level of money, beer, slot machines and commercial trivia. Unfortunately, a few loud drunken Finns made their predictable appearance outside our cabin at around one or two in the morning. Of course, in decibel terms our otherwise charming room fronting on Strandvagen in Stockholm in the Diplomat Hotel the night before had been louder, but street noise is far easier to ignore than raucous, drunken shouting.

On the Tallink the rough edges of the crew and the ship, although it has been renovated somewhat, quickly reminded us that we were heading toward what so recently was part of the Soviet Union. Certainly the fellow guiding cars onto the ship tipped his origins when he asked if I could speak Russian (we had failed to "register" before driving on, since there were no signs indicating this was necessary). Most large vessels acquire some character over their years at sea; the Tallink for the moment has no distinct personality. It inhabits that uneasy post-communist transitional phase-space which its parent country, as well as its two small Baltic neighbors, also now occupy.

Friday, August 19

Bonn. My room in the Hotel Maritim overlooks the Rhine. Tugs and ferries ply busily up and down, back and forth. On the opposite bank just a short walk downstream lies the American Embassy. You have to take a ferry to reach it; the nearest bridge is several miles away.

The U.S. Ambassadors to the Nordic countries and I have been summoned to Bonn by Richard Holbrooke, Assistant Secretary-designate for European Affairs, whose task is to inject new vitality into what almost everyone by now sees as a flagging U.S. foreign policy. Bob Frasure, until July our ambassador in Tallinn, is one of his new deputies. It should have been immediately clear to me that Bob's new responsibilities include the Bosnian nightmare. His face and eyes have the look of someone engaged in trench warfare - tired, depressed, even frightened. Bob tells me I can't imagine what working in the Department is like now. I assure him, in retrospect far too breezily, that I can.

In the Embassy conference room, Dick floats with us his idea of creating a new regional office dealing with just the Nordics and the Baltic States. His general conception of how the Bureau will work is, to simplify, "the way it used to be" - the regional bureau firmly in charge, issuing a steady stream of instructions to embassies and shaping regional policy, with ambassadors taking the lead in maintaining the health of the bilateral relationships on which these regional policies depend.

There is a dinner for us at Dick's residence, a splendid place overlooking the Rhine that has housed American Ambassadors to Germany beginning with John McCloy. The guests include the Nordic ambassadors to Germany, various German specialists, and Latvian Ambassador Kesteris. Swedish Ambassador Orjan (and Benedicte) Berner have recently come from Moscow. As I join them they are speaking with Kati Marton, a slim woman of a certain unbuffed cerebral charm. They are talking about Raoul Wallenberg; Kati says her publisher is about to reissue her book on Wallenberg, written ten years ago, and she is working up a new introduction. She of course is inclined to believe that Wallenberg lived long after the Soviets say he died (in 1947); Berner does not.

At the end of the evening Holbrooke asks the ambassadors to stay on for a wrap-up talk. To my surprise, he seats Kati Marton next to him and takes her hand from time to time as we talk about our business. Derek Shearer (Ambassador to Finland whose sister Brooke is married to Strobe Talbott) informs me that (a) Kati and Dick are an item; (b) she is still married to but separated from Peter Jennings, to whom she refers as her "was-band."

Sunday, February 12, 1995

Aboard a Lufthansa flight from Frankfurt to Riga. Coming back from Strasbourg, where on Friday a ceremony marked Latvia's formal admission into the Council of Europe. It has been a long time in coming, delayed mostly by the COE's doubts over Latvia's hesitation about citizenship for Russians in Latvia, to call the problem by its simplest name. But with a naturalization law now being implemented and a law on aliens close to adoption, the moment was judged ripe. Latvia is now the 34th member state, its flag flying proudly, thanks to the alphabet, right in the middle.

I decided at the last moment to witness this culmination of a process that began while I was still Consul General in Strasbourg. Janis Jurkans, who made Latvia's first, tentative contacts in Strasbourg, was there too, as was Georgs Andrejevs, who resigned as Foreign Minister last year because of his collaboration, marginal though it was, with the KGB. E. unfortunately at that very moment was in Helsinki for extensive dental work, which she dreads.

For me it was an intense three days of meetings with old friends and colleagues. With Assembly President Martinez and Secretary General Tarschys I raised the question of coming to terms with the past: does Russia have any responsibility today for what happened in the Baltic States during the Soviet era? My conviction is that there will be no stable relationship between Russia and Latvia until Russia acknowledges that Latvia was annexed by force and assumes at least a moral, if not necessarily legal, responsibility for the consequences. Martinez, while interested, stressed the need to look forward, an emphasis with which in general I agree. Both, though, seemed willing to consider whether the "Baltic question" might be addressed in a COE-sponsored history project.

On the lighter side, Jane Chandler arranged a dinner at Le Clou with Nico's "foster parents" the Boulangers and with Dominique and Anne Foata. On Saturday I persuaded Chris and Benedicta Kruger to go on an outing in the Vosges, where we enjoyed an ample Alsacian meal in Obernai and then took an invigorating hike along the Pagan Wall below the Mont St. Odile convent. Remarkably, at the admission ceremony itself I found myself standing shoulder to shoulder with Henrik Amneus, now Sweden's Ambassador to the COE.

Monday, April 3

London, The Churchill, Portman Square. Last Friday underwent surgery at the hands of Mr. Geoffrey Glazer. Let's hope Mr. Glazer's work will last my lifetime.

Not the reason E. and I would have chosen for coming to London but we're making the most of it. Now into our second week, we've seen a sparkling, refreshingly cerebral play, Tom Stoppard's "Arcadia" at the Theatre Royal, and a nicely filmed "Dorothy Parker and the Vicious Circle." We took the tube up to Highgate and toured both cemeteries, passing by Marx and Spenser, then strolled lazily across Hampstead Heath to Keats' house, rejoicing in the arrival of spring and our escape to the principal wellspring of what used to be America's culture.

Tuesday, April 4

Blundered around the University of London, couldn't even find University College without several tries, landmarks failing to jog my memory. How faint an imprint my six months of study two decades ago have left. Finally managed to pay my respects to the remains of Jeremy Bentham inside the college. More than a wax figure but less than a mummy, the father of Utilitarianism by his own wish is on display in a glass box. His true skeleton is the core of the likeness, clothed in a black suit and crowned with his countenance. But a notice displayed alongside is careful to point out that Mr. Bentham's head is not the real one, only a wax replica, the true skull being secured in the university safe. One senses a certain ennui with student pranks.

Then to the British Museum for a peek at the domed Reading Room and a long gaze on the Elgin Marbles.

Thursday, April 6

Yesterday, the worst headache in several decades, reminiscent of the agony after my skull fracture during military training almost 30 years ago. Spent half the day in bed; it began to abate around 2:30. Impossible to say what brought it on, obviously not the half pint of stout I had the day before. No help from the embassy doc. Only certain kinds of headaches, it seems, are considered a medical issue. Mine seems to be, as we used to say in the Army, a personal problem.

Drinks Wednesday evening in the Churchill bar, Clementine's, with Michael Shea, not seen since Bucharest. After Bucharest Michael went on to become press secretary to the Queen for some years, now has branched into all sorts of boards and companies plus teaching but says he derives most income from his writing. Two books about to come out, one with film rights already sold. Michael, in an appealing way, clearly enjoys more money coming in than he needs. His wife Mona had a hysterectomy a week ago, alarmingly is having fainting spells, so a group get-together was not possible.

An anecdote from Michael's Royal Years. With the Queen on a visit to the surprisingly spartan Reagan ranch in the early 80's. Reagan is being prepped for a speech to be given shortly. Bustling staffers hand him a text and apologize to the President for giving him no opportunity to scan it in advance. "But don't worry, sir, all the key parts are underlined!" The Queen remarks, "And I thought I was the constitutional monarch!"

Today a long museum walk, first to the Science Museum where I am captivated by a silkily functioning Corliss steam engine designed to power 1700 looms. What glorious creatures the Industrial Revolution spawned, if you like huge, intricate, finely polished and delicately balanced rhythmically chuffing metal behemoths.

Sunday, April 9

Reading the Sunday Times in Grosvenor Square. Sunny, cold. Behind and above me the American Embassy's metal eagle spreads his 35-foot wings. The eagle is looking sharply left and down toward a bronze Eisenhower, who directs his own gaze toward his wartime military headquarters. In front of me and to the left stands Franklin Delano Roosevelt, honored for bringing us into the war. Oblique right is a memorial to the Eagle Squadron, American fliers who joined the war effort early. Directly opposite lies the Italian Embassy, flanked by the Canadian High Commission. A few dogwalkers. Some pigeons in the early stages of the mating game. Steady traffic noise.

Sunday, April 23

Stockholm. A sunny spring morning in Skansen. Bliss. I enter at 9 o'clock, as soon as the gates open, and for the first hour have the place pretty much to myself. Small creatures are starting to stir: lambs, a cluster of energetic baby wild boars, a small black foal. On the mare's back are four birds of an unfamiliar type, busily collecting batches of the winter coat she is shedding to use as nest material. She thinks it's just fine and contentedly lets them do their work. I coax the foal over to the fence so I can rub his nose. Nearby a perky litter of wild boars scamper around with their mother, digging in the sandy soil for roots while their father lies near a sheltering pile of branches, dead to the world.

E. and I are in Stockholm for a regional conference of ambassadors: Nordic, Baltic and, as a special treat, Tom Pickering from Moscow. It's Dick Holbrooke's idea. He's also brought along Kati Marton (see above), who's done not only the Wallenberg book but also another with a Swedish connection - A Death in Jerusalem, the story of the assassination of Count Folke Bernadotte. Dick and Kati's wedding is just a month or so away, we are told, and so indeed it would appear even to an uninformed observer.

We're staying in the Hasselbacken Hotel, next to Skansen and almost within eyeshot of our former home at Djurgardsslatten 104, that dear creaky old house where Cecilia Hagen and her children still live, as E. found by paying a visit this morning.

The ambassadors' conference left something of a bad taste. For one thing, after exhorting us to "stop whinging" about budget cuts, later in the session Holbrooke did an about-face and apologized to us for having to ask us to carry out such a misguided policy - one with which, he said, he profoundly disagrees.

Toward the end, during the session with Tom Pickering, I made the point that the President's decision to commemorate May 9 in Moscow leaves him vulnerable politically. It represents his participation in the celebration of a Russian military victory - the defeat of Hitler by Stalin - on the heels of Russian military atrocities against civilians, including of course Russian civilians, in Chechnya. Moreover, it comes at a time when the Russians seem to be jerking us around, refusing to reverse their decision to provide nuclear technology to Iran and becoming increasingly unhelpful vis-a-vis the Serbs in former Yugoslavia. (We had just been humiliated that very day when the Serbs refused to permit our new ambassador to Bosnia as well as special representative Bob Frasure to get from the airport into Sarajevo. After spending a night in sleeping bags, they finally flew back out again leaving what is left of our policy, in Holbrooke's own words, in tatters.)

Pickering said it would be just veterans parading in Moscow. Bill Miller, ambassador to Ukraine, maintained that after all the May 9 celebrations are about the victory over fascism. I said it might be possible to maintain that if the President were commemorating the event in Paris or London. In Moscow, it means commemorating Stalin's victory over Hitler, the enslavement of Eastern Europe, the annexation of the Baltic States, and the beginning of the Cold War. And that meant we must make sure in statements before and during the event what we were celebrating and what not. Not the most important element, but useful, I said, would be a statement, perhaps before Moscow, mentioning the special fate of the Baltic States. And more in this vein.

Pam Pearson, a political officer who had been one of the early TDY'ers in Riga, came up afterward and congratulated me for the "courage" of my statement. As for most of my colleagues, I think they viewed it as something akin to farting at the dinner table, to put it in language Lyndon Johnson would approve. Holbrooke ended that discussion with the assertion that "Neither Yeltsin nor Clinton can afford for the summit not to be a success, so it will be a success!"

Monday, April 24

Nico, back in France after a spring trip to Florence (ah!), sounds fine. His college choices are excellent. No rejections. He's been accepted by Princeton, Chicago, Georgetown and the University of Virginia; Harvard and Columbia have him on their waiting list. He decides to send an acceptance letter to Princeton but wants to see if he can get accepted by Harvard and Columbia too, leaving until later the decision whether actually to go to one of them rather than Princeton.

Wednesday, April 26

Riga. Juris Vitins, a relative on my father's side, died while we were in Stockholm. E. and I take Margita along to his funeral.

We arrive at the small chapel near the entrance to the Forest Park cemetery and place our flowers on the stepped ledges of the stand on which lies the open coffin. Juris is pale, waxy; he has gone. It occurs to me that I would not want to be laid out in an open coffin after my death.

At noon six of Juris' brothers-in-arms form up alongside the coffin. We wait. An electric organ plays. In a few minutes a corpulent middle-aged man wearing brown shoes, baggy pants and a nondescript black raincoat comes from behind a screen and steps to the foot of the coffin. It is not clear whether he is a minister; he seems more an underpaid caretaker from an earlier age, one at home in the works of Tolstoy or Dickens. But from his mouth come sonorous, moving words summing up Juris' life, his struggle on behalf of his country, and the love his family and friends feel for him.

We follow the coffin to the burial plot. It is lowered, unsealed, into the grave. Juris' wife Anna, his daughter Dzintra, her husband, E. and I and a few others toss handfuls of yellow sand onto the coffin. Four gravediggers then ply their shovels swiftly and skillfully, filling the hole in minutes, then forming a coffin-shaped mound of sand above the grave with expert slices and pats of their shovel blades. The job done, one of them prints a cross onto the sand coffin with two sure pushes of his shovel's handle. They stand back respectfully. The minister/caretaker speaks again. We cover the grave with flowers.

Juris was 63. His final years were painful and only his tremendous will kept him going. The autopsy showed all his organs had deteriorated, a process no doubt traceable to ten years in Siberian exile, some to the heavy drinking that he conquered. I miss him.

Thursday, April 27

Around 4:30 in the afternoon I notice unusual activity in front of the Embassy. Looking out my office window, I see a man on his back beside the flagpole, his white face staring up at the flag and, now, at me. An ambulance stands by the curb and several people are standing near it, talking. Soon the ambulance drives off, leaving the man still lying beneath the flag. It seems he has been pronounced dead and is now in someone else's jurisdiction. He lies there for another 45 minutes, now covered with a black cloth, while three government agencies prepare the documentation needed to admit him to a morgue. Finally he is taken away.

Friday, April 28

There is a debate in the press about new nominations for the Order of the Three Stars, Latvia's highest award. Some 57 persons are reported to be on the latest list. This seems a lot. Is Latvia is trying to make up for the 50 years during which the Order was suppressed? In part, no doubt it is.

Most controversial are the nominations of former Latvian Prime Minister Ivars Godmanis and French President Mitterrand for the highest degree of the Order. I find the choice of Mitterrand particularly unsuitable given the humiliation - unnecessary, in my opinion - that he inflicted on the Baltic States at the Paris CSCE summit. This was in the winter of 1990-91. After long negotiations, a formula had been meticulously worked out for including the foreign ministers of the not-yet-independent Baltic States in the proceedings. Yet when Gorbachev looked out over the hall and saw the Baltic ministers, a whispered ultimatum to Mitterrand sufficed to impel the French host to order them ejected from the hall. A day of shame for the CSCE and one which Mitterrand did not, in my opinion, redeem by any subsequent support for Baltic independence. French engagement here in any case has seemed rather cool except in certain security-related activities. No doubt the French consider the Balts too irredeemably prone to German influence to invest much energy here.

Mitterrand's managing to be the first Western head of state to visit Riga was surely not enough to erase his disgraceful performance at the CSCE summit. During that visit, I now recall, he said something fairly snide to me at the crowded reception in the hastily spiffed-up French Embassy. I remember rising to the occasion with a tart riposte. E. confirms I was pleased with my comeback at the time, but I can't remember now what Mitterrand or I said. This must be the opposite of l'esprit de l'escalier. I doubt we can hope to find an account of this moment in Mitterrand's memoirs.

Saturday, April 29

There is more to the Three-Star scandal than controversy about the nominations of Mitterrand and Godmanis. Again card files left behind by the KGB take their toll. The enormously engaging Professor Janis Stradins is the latest victim. His letter to President Ulmanis, resigning from the Three Star selection committee and declining his own nomination for an award, appears in today's Diena. Stradins' story is much like Andrejevs'; as a scientist, he was required to report on the scientific aspects of his foreign travel, but he claims he never reported on his colleagues, or knowingly to the KGB, for that matter. But Stradins felt he had to withdraw because his name appears in the card files the KGB left behind.

These KGB records are a poison pill that Latvian society has yet to neutralize. KGB veterans must be smiling grimly at how their work continues to torment Latvia. President Ulmanis yesterday, in a meeting with parliamentary leaders, said something has to be done about the KGB records soon but he specified only what should not be done: destruction of the files, which would leave unanswered questions, or sealing them, which could always be undone. Ulmanis called for resolution of the issue by the Saeima, but that fledgling institution has not proved up to the task till now.

Thursday, May 4

The spectacular demolition, synchronized to New Age music, of the unfinished Skrunda large phased-array radar was the most visible U.S. intervention in Latvia since President Clinton's visit to Riga last July. The 19-story "Skrunda monster," as most Latvians call it, collapsed in a huge heap under its tile-encrusted slanting receiver wall, sending a thick brown cloud of dust drifting slowly toward the apartments housing Russians who continue to work at the Skrunda Hen House radar. It symbolizes the end - or must we continue to say, the beginning of the end? - of the era of Soviet occupation.

Moscow is annoyed. There was last-minute pressure, mostly through the media, to delay the irreversible moment. Afterwards, the deputy speaker of the Duma sent President Ulmanis a telegram calling the demolition "an act of state stupidity." Kozyrev strikes a manful note, pointing out that after all the building belongs to Latvia.

Saturday, May 6

A walk along the beach at Jurmala. Gray weather. Fine sand. A malodorous brown muck lines the water's edge as far as the eye can see.

I drive for no particular reason once again to the tiny coastal town of Engure. I love its little church though I have never set foot inside. And there's something romantic and melancholy about its well-tended cemetery by the sea. Two small girls, unaccompanied, come with little bunches of flowers and place them on a fresh grave.

Monday, May 8

The Latvian leadership and diplomatic corps dash back and forth across Riga in Keystone Cops motorcades as we commemorate VE Day. Not an unambiguous event here, certainly not a liberation. That must be part of the reason why we went rocketing back and forth. First, with President Ulmanis and Prime Minister Gailis in the lead, we stand for an hour in a cold drizzle at the Brethren Cemetery. As acting dean, I lay flowers on behalf of the diplomatic corps. Then an unscheduled dash to the Jewish cemetery, probably because two nights ago an explosion went off at the Riga synagogue, causing damage but not casualties. Then to the German and finally the Russian/Soviet cemeteries, all at top speed. At the Russian cemetery, a motley group formed up, then gave forth beautiful music to accompany the short service. A cheap-looking fake-bronze relief of a young Soviet soldier flourishing the inevitable hammer-and-sickle banner jarred with the mood of reconciliation.

Meantime the celebrations of the 50th anniversary of victory are reaching epochal levels in London. After two days of fun in sunny Hyde Park, the climax is a huge public gathering in front of Buckingham Palace to mirror what happened exactly half a century earlier. The emotion of victory remembered reportedly stimulated a kiss from Prince Charles to Princess Diana's cheek, the first in many a moon to which we have witnesses. In Paris, the celebrations have a two-fold meaning for French conservatives, who have just seen Jacques Chirac finally win the French presidency. The United States, unfortunately, is represented at the European festivals by Vice President Gore, not the President. Clinton has been persuaded to focus on the May 9 observance in Moscow. A pity. Worse, a mistake.

Fascism and anti-semitism as issues have lurched sickeningly to the fore in Latvia, with a helping hand from Big Brother to complement all-too-human local proclivities. Before the synagogue bombing, there was a flap over publication of 10,000 Latvian-language copies of Mein Kampf. More unpleasant was the "revelation" by a former KGB-nik in Moscow that President Ulmanis' father had collaborated with the Nazi special services. Not an accident; it coincided with the President's travel to Paris and London for VE commemorations. This rising nastiness is all too reminiscent of the old Soviet propaganda line that the Balts were just nasty little antisemites, civilized only by the firm Soviet hand that brought them into Moscow's fold. Looks like the start of a mud fight; they're always hard to win.

Wednesday, May 10

Yesterday I watched part of the Moscow celebrations on TV. Clinton attended the parade of veterans, reportedly including veterans of Chechnya, in Red Square but not the military parade at Poklonnaya Gora. He did, however, arrive there in time to help dedicate a huge, ugly, tasteless and expensive new war monument, one that according to Vlad Posner had already been a gleam in more than one apparatchik's eye in the Brezhnev era. I heard part of General Grachev's climactic speech, the part where he said Russia's defeat of Germany saved world civilization and Russia therefore needs a strong military force.

In Riga, around noon, the sound of a large but distant explosion shook my office window. A similar noise buffeted the bedroom windows that evening. Today we read it was probably Mitterrand's Concorde, going to and from Moscow.

Today the Clinton-Yeltsin bilaterals took place in Moscow, with meager results. At the joint press conference Yeltsin said there was no Russian military action in Chechnya now, just Interior Ministry forces confiscating illegal arms from bandits. Clinton did not contradict him to his face - one could argue, I suppose, there was no need, since it's patently untrue. The President does issue an unambiguous call for an end to the Chechen tragedy in his speech at Moscow State University.

One conclusion: whatever this is, it is not a "Summit."

Saturday, May 13

In the morning I jog down to the old Legation, first taking a loop around the waterside restaurant in Kronvalda Park. Renovation work on the restaurant, it seems, is not only incomplete but terminated. Must have been a bankruptcy.

Grey skies, an intermittent light drizzle. Few people out. Exceptions are the very old and the very young, who have their different reasons for shrugging off the weather. Also to be seen are the inevitable young men carrying briefcases or bags. During my visit to Riga in the Soviet era, some of those were focused on me, and they were carrying the tools of the KGB trade.

The topic calls up a memory of my visits to Riga during the Soviet period and my first visit to Leningrad, when I shamelessly tried to shake my "tail" in the subway. These days it's harder to tell what they're up to.

Pondering this point, I round a corner near the Swedish Gate and almost run into a young man with a bag. He passes to my right. I stand watching him. Half a block away, he stops and turns. We look at each other. He turns and walks off, as do I.

Tuesday, May 16

A visit to a trial in Riga District Court. It lies behind the central train station. We're back in the seventeenth century, with a heavy Soviet overlay.

The case, chosen at random, concerns the theft, almost two years ago, of about 5 tons of manure fertilizer. Value: 5 lats ($10 at today's rate). In fact, the manure was returned the next day but the case plodded inexorably on through the legal system nevertheless. The defendant is a slim, likeable Ukrainian driver, Vladimir Monoilenko. He understands a good deal of Latvian but prefers to speak Russian. The court provides an interpreter, a Russian sex bomb (thinks she is) in a black miniskirt. Monoilenko declines a lawyer, mumbling about lawyer's fees compared to the value of the manure, which he admits having taken.

Asked why he didn't respond to earlier summons to appear that the court began to issue this January, Monoilenko's basic argument is that he couldn't believe this case was going to trial. I find this plausible.

There is a good deal of Soviet-style fussing around. The judge, who is flanked by two lay assessors, clearly refined her technique during the Soviet period. Finally the prosecutor, an appealing dark-haired young Latvian woman who seems to have been hit hard in the right temple, asks for a six-month suspended sentence with one year's probation. The judges retire to ponder the case. We depart.

Thursday, May 18

The Latvian Government has the misfortune of facing simultaneously a budget crisis and a banking crisis. I meet separately with Latvian Bank President Einars Repse and Finance Minister Andris Piebalgs. To both I quote the old Chinese proverb, "Every crisis is an opportunity." (I first heard this in Vietnam, where it did not, apparently, apply.) What I mean is that Bank Baltija's vulnerability offers a chance to clean up banking practices as well as cleaning out some undesirable characters.

The banking crisis centers on Bank Baltija's liquidity problem triggered by the maturing of time deposits on which BB promised 90% interest. Most suspect there is more to it than that, and estimates of the shortfall run as high as $57 million. This is beyond the government's ability to cover, but neither can the government leave BB's 500,000 depositors entirely to their fate; elections are only four months off. I urge Repse to focus on protecting small depositors and to seize the opportunity to force BB to clean up its act and its management. I point out that BB's top dog, Aleksander Lavent, can't get a U.S. visa because of his past criminal record. Repse, showing signs of stress, says he is in effect compelled to enlist cooperation from Lavent and the bank. On the budget side, a dearth of revenues combined with difficulty in selling Treasury bills force the government to resort to commercial loans at punishing rates to meet basic obligations. That situation cannot go on, and drastic cuts are to be announced tomorrow.

Thursday, May 25

Ukrainian President Leonid Kuchma was in Riga on Tuesday and Wednesday. As acting dean of the diplomatic corps I greeted him at the airport on arrival and departure and attended the state dinner in Riga Castle. A taciturn technocrat, Kuchma strikes me as a positive figure, oriented toward reforms and good ties with the West.

In the meantime, Latvia's banking crisis has steadily grown in size. Bank Baltija's financial operations have been suspended while work toward a takeover agreement goes on. Finance Minister Piebalgs announced his resignation last week; today he was replaced by one of his deputies, Indra Samite, a young Latvian-American educated at Drexel. Repse is under some threat as well but will likely survive; his deputy, Ilmars Rimsevics, may not, as the hunt for scapegoats intensifies. I tell Gailis, Birkavs and other members of the leadership to focus the search for culprits on Bank Baltija, particularly Lavent, not the central bank or the government.

Sunday, May 28

With E. to the Press Ball last night. Our third - or am I losing count? Definitely low-budget compared to last year's extravaganza; few frills or flourishes, perhaps because of the Bank Baltija bust. Yet it was refreshing, too, to see fewer of the ostentatious nouveau riche, more normal young people having a good time.

Left early; we're both pretty run down after a long stretch with virtually no free evenings. Friday night was one of the more pleasant ones, a jazz evening with the Egils Straume trio at the British Embassy, continuing a tradition that E. and I started in our residence two summers ago. The bass player, Ivars Galenieks, is wonderful, a brooding musician from Dostoyevsky with a bald forehead, long straggly hair hanging down in back, and the strong dangerous hands of a crazed peasant.

Even Saturday was a busy day for me, with a visit to the Latvia's Way pre-election party conference, a talk with a visiting Congressional staffer (Anne Smith, who works for Jesse Helms), and an afternoon garden party at Karine Petersone and Raimonds Auskaps's half-house in Meza Parks to bid farewell to the Lassillas.

In the meantime in former Yugoslavia, Bosnian Serbs, provoked by UN-ordered airstrikes, have taken almost 200 members of the UN peacekeeping force hostage.

Monday, May 29

Memorial Day, so the Embassy is closed. In the afternoon E., my mother and I drive down to a horticultural research station near Dobele.

We take the Embassy car rather than the offered bus and are the first to arrive. The view greets us of a large field recently cleared, with huge piles of brush still heaped up on it. On an adjacent plot of land is an unimposing stand of head-high lilac which we are invited to admire. We have plenty of time to do so. The bus bearing the other guests arrives an hour late; it seems they were waiting, in vain, for Sirka Lassilla, wife of the Finnish Ambassador. The lilac varieties bear names like "Girl of Dobele" and "Love of Life." One of them is named after Imants Ziedonis, a gesture that I believe indirectly gave rise to this event.

After the others join us and we have heard the Lilac Lecture, we trudge over to another field for a reading by Imants Ziedonis, not one of his best, and a harpsichord (actually, virginal) concert by Aina Kalnciema. The quality of the music is excellent, but there is a practical problem: clouds of mosquitoes. We have come prepared, and I apply repellent to Aina as well. But there is hardly enough for all, and many suffer acutely through the concert.

Saturday, June 3

First to the annual handicrafts fair at the Ethnographic Museum, which is getting better and better. I stand for half an hour near the stage, which is ingeniously shaded by a silk parachute suspended from the trees, where Latvian boys and girls assemble to perform folk dances. Quick changes of costume, much running about, herding by the parents and older girls, crises, some tears. The boys more mischievous, all lovable.

It suddenly reminds me of being backstage at the Kennedy Center in Washington when the Kirov Ballet was peforming, perhaps in 1987. What an athletic event dancing, especially ballet, is! It took me aback to see how stringily muscular the lead female dancers were up close. The vigorous massaging their handlers gave their thighs and calves between numbers was just like the rubbing, oiling and pummeling boxers get from their trainers between rounds.

In the afternoon we drive down to Ojars Felbergs' annual spring art festival at Firkspedvale, near Sabile. It's a crumbling German estate in a delicious hilly locale, the Abava Valley. Felbergs has had the imagination to transform it into a setting for art even while most of it is still in a state of dramatic ruin. There are sculptures in the wrecked buildings, and stone and wooden structures throughout the woods and fields. Today even the horses and cows, tastefully distributed in the fragrant, flowering pastures, are pendants on the necklace of Art.

Sunday, June 4

In the morning with my mother and Margita to the Raina Cemetery to place flowers at my grandparents' grave. Then to the much fresher grave of Juris Vitins, nearby.

Saturday, June 10

Up until now the bank crisis has if anything only grown in scope, with the shortfall creeping toward 200 million lats ($400 million). Uldis Klauss, the Latvian-American named to take over Bank Baltija, finds fresh horrors each time he digs deeper into the books. It's a classic Ponzi scheme, he says, which perhaps came to an unexpectedly rapid end because a small and impoverished country like Latvia can't provide enough gullible victims. Nevertheless last week the government team gave bank strongman Lavent another two weeks to come up with cash to salvage the operation. Not entirely clear why Lavent asked for the delay, nor why he got it. Most likely, he's using the time to spin the web more tightly, hide assets more deeply, or destroy the evidence of malfeasance.

But the cavalry is coming, the IMF rep told me yesterday. A Bank of London expert with experience in global-scale bank fraud is writing up a set of recommendations, and a team will be assembled. Yesterday I told Foreign Minister Birkavs the bank scandal alone is not a problem for Latvia; everyone expected a bank collapse. What could really hurt Latvia is a failure to act decisively to remedy it or to permit criminals to remain in banking here.

Tuesday, June 20

The tempo of [diplomatic] arrivals and departures quickens. We near the end of a round of farewell events for the Lassillas. E. and I are having to make up lists of guests for our own round of farewell dinners, beginning with one on July 3 hosted by [Israeli Ambassador] Tova Herzl.

No relief yet on the banking crisis, with the government still dodging a decision. When I saw Einars Repse at the Queen's Birthday reception, he seemed quite haggard, whether from fatigue or fear I couldn't be sure. To my chagrin, all the Western banking specialists - the senior IMF, EBRD and World Bank reps - have just left for vacation, as though the crisis were over.

Thursday, June 22

Walt Slocombe, an old acquaintance from Princeton who is now Under Secretary for Policy at the Defense Department, was in Riga for a two-day visit, coinciding with that of the frigate USS Taylor. The official program ended at about 5 pm, and Nico and I joined Walt on a bike trip across the Daugava and back.

Friday, June 23

We didn't join the Diplomatic Corps for the annual midsummer expedition, instead drove to Ungurmuiza near Cesis/Sigulda - where we wound up with a busload of German tourists, a group active in the Lutheran Church. But a pleasant evening nevertheless, and a nice drive back to the Embassy around midnight, still light.

Tuesday, July 4

Sunday we had our now-traditional Independence Day outdoor cookout, about 600 people and hamburgers, hot dogs, Tex-Mex, apple pie, salads, beer, soft drinks, and two bands, the Riga Wind Orchestra and a small jazz group, both of them excellent. Splendid weather, cool and sunny just as during the President's visit. My diplomatic colleagues are baffled and envious; they wonder how I do it. I use my short speech, in Latvian and English, to say goodbye, and E. makes some moving remarks, much appreciated.

Yesterday was the first of our formal farewell dinners, this one hosted by Tova Herzl with guests including Foreign Minister Valdis Birkavs, Professor Janis Stradins, Diena editor in chief Sarmite Elerte, Atis Lejins, and some others. Nico was there too, mature and good-looking in tie and blazer.

Today we all feel as though run over by a truck, not from the dinner but from the general stress of preparing to depart. It's the most difficult time, with most of the sorting and arranging still ahead of us. Well, I didn't make any progress on it today, instead taking a long and rather aimless drive with Nico northwest along the Baltic coast beyond Engure, then over to Talsi and back to Riga. Most of the way back we drive through a light rain.

Friday, July 7

My farewell call on President Ulmanis, fittingly, is in his new office in Riga Castle. Much of the old building is still awaiting a facelift, but the President's office and the approaches to it have been attractively redone. At the President's request, E. accompanies me. During the meeting, she urges him to remain optimistic, look to the future, and put his hope in Latvia's children.

Wednesday, July 12

With packing now going full blast, I hold my last large staff meeting, then attend a G-24 meeting focused on legal education. Also there is Soros Fund president Aryeh Neier, who indicates he is inclined to support Sweden's lead in establishing a law program in conjunction with the Stockholm School of Economics in Riga.

As I walk back to the Embassy and approach the Freedom Monument, an old lady springs up from a bench, thanks me for what I have done for Latvia during the past four years, and gives me a kiss. A nice ending: it was another old lady on the same bench who muttered "traitor!" as I walked by not so many months ago.

Friday, July 14

At 8:15 a.m. E., Nico and I, accompanied by the Chief of Protocol and a small delegation from the Embassy, leave for the airport. We receive flowers before boarding the Baltic International flight, a Tupolev 134, for Frankfurt, where we change to Delta Airlines for Washington. So ends one story.

End of interview